

## **The Ice Queen of Hawkins** by charmedlion22

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**Summary:** Veronica Henderson was your typical teen girl with typical teen angst. She's the snowfall before the blizzard, her blood running cold and her words soft but sharp when pointed at her enemy. She loves her mom and her brother and has formed an "our dads suck club" with best friend Jonathan. When Will Byers disappears, everything changes. But will the Ice Queen's walls begin to thaw?

# 1. The Vanishing of Will Byers

Hi all, and welcome to my *Stranger Things* Steve Harrington/OC story! It's been a long, long time coming. Seriously. Since 2017 long.

I just updated the first chapter, so this is a little different than the original I posted. In this story, we've got the Ice Queen of Hawkins, the older-but-shorter-by-season 2 sister of Dustin Henderson, because he deserves an older sibling. She's Veronica, and even though *Heathers* came out in 1989 I've taken the liberty of borrowing some of my favorite quotes because Winona Ryder Easter Eggs. Seriously, I cannot overstate my love for that movie. Anyway, there's more of a backstory for the Henderson family, including adding the dad to the "asshole fathers club", co-president with Lonnie Byers, the prick. Expect explicit language because, hello, *Stranger Things* isn't known for censoring language.

Fair warning, while this is Steve/OC the season 2 part will include Billy/OC, but not for long. I promise. He's a great villain, but he's a dick until he isn't. Just wanted to get that out of the way. Because again, he's a dick. But I'm also treating their relationship a bit like Jackson Whittemore and Lydia Martin's from *Teen Wolf*, especially with the later outcome. And there will also be inbetween chapters between ST 1 and ST 2, then ST 2 and ST 3, adding some more things as well as a deeper dive into how Max and Billy's relationship changes, because let's be honest that wasn't really commented on in ST 3, and I'd like to see it. But this will not be a Billy Hargrove/OC endgame story. Not like that.

Anyway, we're starting off at the first episode. And here's a quick little description for the character so you get a taste of what she's like: When you think about Veronica, picture Lili Reinhart but if she were the same height as Camila Mendes. She's best friends with Jonathan because their dad's would hunt together, and Will is like another little brother to her. She's relatively close to Nancy and Barb, but she's not as open with them as she

is with Jonathan - who is also like a brother to her, I won't be shipping them. She and Steve are complicated and complete idiots about their feelings for awhile, so this will be a slow burn. Be prepared for that. She also starts off suffering from depression and anxiety, and is a good girl who takes the proper medication and sees a therapist on the reg, especially after 1983. Expect cute sibling moments and the kids to call her "mom." She's an archer who only misses when she means to unless very distracted, all because she was obsessed with Robin Hood at a young age. Her dad took her hunting and camping from a young age, so the woods are like a second home to her. She's popular but in a 80s teen villain way, or a Claire from *The Breakfast Club* way. Think more along the lines of Heath Ledger's Ten Things I Hate About You character. What her dad pulled made her cold rather than hot, and she's the Ice Queen because she's chilly and reminds people of the snowfall before the blizzard, if that makes sense. I originally had her as cheer captain, but decided that it makes her the wrong type of popular I had in mind, plus I like popular kids who are popular because they don't take shit from anyone, not because of a high school label like "cheer captain" or "rich girl" or whatever.

I hope you like this OC, it took me forever to flesh her out, and figure out who she is because she's complex (at least from my point of view). Enjoy the story! I only own Veronica.

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I walk through my front door and close it behind me with my back against the hard wood, locking it without looking. Despite it being a school night, I asked for a longer shift at my job at Hunting & Camping. Christmas is coming up in a couple of months, and my brother's been eyeing a new telescope.

My mom sits on her cushioned chair, watching TV and petting her cat, Mews. The cat hisses at me, and I hiss back, but thankfully my mom is too enthralled by the soap she's watching to pay attention to her two fighting babies. So I drop my keys in the bowl by the front door and walk up to her, booping Mews on the nose and laughing when he goes a little cross-eyed and huffy. My mom finally realizes I'm home and smiles that warm, loving smile Dustin inherited,

tugging me down for a smothering but welcome kiss on the cheek. "Dumpling, you look exhausted!"

"Thanks, mom." I mutter, and she gives me a look. "Yeah, I am. Long shift. Mark took, like, twelve smoke breaks, and the seventh one was during a random rush. But there were no angry customers, which is nice considering I work in a place surrounded by weapons." I walk into the kitchen to grab the leftover lasagna I can smell from across the room, leaning against the counter and chewing delicately and tiredly. Claudia Henderson, just as exhausted as me but powered by her awesome mother abilities stands and walks to me, Mews still in her arms. "Is Dustin home yet?"

"About thirty minutes ago, sweetheart." She gives me a hesitant look, then sighs. "Your father called earlier. Said he wanted to speak to you."

"I have nothing to say to him." I coldly respond. "He doesn't have the right to call us. Not after what he did."

"Dumpling -"

"Mom, no." I tear up and look away. "I'm sorry. I know it's even harder on you. I shouldn't be so -"

"Veronica Leigh Henderson, stop that. You are allowed to be angry. I just don't like hiding things from you."

After what my dad pulled, honesty has become the biggest rule in the Henderson household. Which is a good thing. I don't trust easily, not anymore, but at least I have a few good people to rely on.

"Okay, mom." I smile at her. I've been told it's distinct, but I find my mom and brother's to be the most brilliant. I set the empty dish in the sink. "Thank you for telling me. And we'll see. Maybe I should, just to give him a piece of my mind. The son of a bitch deserves it."

"Veronica, language!" She scolds me, and whips at me playfully with a dish rag. I yelp and jump back a bit to avoid the hit, my reflexes as quick as usual. "Go to bed."

"I can clean up, if you'd like." She shakes her head and waves me off.

"No, no, it's fine. Goodnight, sweetheart." She kisses my cheek and sends me towards my room. "And make sure you have everything packed for your lesson!" My mom yells after me.

"Okay! Love you, goodnight!" I call, continuing on to my room. I pass by my brother's room on the way and see the door is open a crack and the light is on. So I know, and when my brother grunts I roll my eyes and push it open.

His brown curls fall around him, wet. His eyes are especially blue in the light. I'm the odd-one out in my immediate family, getting my maternal grandmother's blonde hair and my paternal grandfather's big green eyes.

"What?" He grumpily asks, frowning up at me. Dustin has cleidocranial dysplasia, which means his bones have a delayed growth. His teeth are finally starting to come in, but he still doesn't have collarbones and speaks with a heavy lisp. It's cute, though, and he's the best thing in my life.

"Easy, D. Just wanted to say goodnight. Do you want me to drop you off at school?"

"I need to bring my bike."

I smile at him, the soft one I save for family and my best friend. "So we'll throw it in the trunk. C'mon. You can't say no to a ride in the *Millenium Falcon*."

For my upcoming 16th birthday, my dad sent me a grey 1981 Ford Falcon station wagon. He's a car dealer, so it was easy for him. And I would have sent it back, his "I'm sorry I haven't been there for you since I'm too busy screwing my former secretary-turned-wife, Happy Birthday, kid" gift, had it not been for the fact we couldn't afford another one on our own. Plus, my brother loves it. He even gave it the name.

I'm not 16, yet. No until the 24th of November, so in a few weeks. But this is Hawkins, Indiana, and unless I decide to drive like a maniac no one actually cares that I only have my learner's permit.

"Shotgun in the *Millenium Falcon*? Hell yeah, Leia!" I roll my eyes at the nickname.

"Okay, it's a deal. But I'm leaving exactly at 8, so if your ass isn't ready by then you're biking, you got it?" I coolly order, and he nods. Then I smile, wide. "Love you, bug. Get some sleep."

"Night, sis." I close the door behind me and walk into my room, just so I can kick off my shoes and grab a fluffy towel.

My shower is quick but warm, the water massaging my sore limbs and washing off any residual irritation I have with my boss and his habit of smoking more than working. I guess he just feels he can, though, since I'd been going to Hunting & Camping since I was a child, back when my dad actually cared about his family and spent time with me. Before mom and I caught him with Allison, the dumb bitch.

After wrapping myself up in the towel, taking care of business and brushing my teeth I pad back into my room and shut the door behind me. I change into a pair of cotton underwear and my large Iron Maiden shirt, letting my wet blonde curls stick to it as I move over to the corner of my room and grab my duffle, carefully putting in my bow and practice arrows, the real ones kept locked under my bed. I'd been doing archery since I was 8, after my dad took me hunting for the first time. I was learning how to use a gun, first, but Robin Hood has always been my favorite story, and my obsession with the archer bled into reality. So even after my dad walked out, I kept going. My hate for him will never overcome what I love.

After making sure I have everything I need for my lesson, I pack up my blue flower print backpack. Hoping I have everything so I just have to wake up, get dressed, and eat tomorrow I turn off the light and jump into bed, taking care to set my alarm. As soon as the covers are drawn under my chin my eyes close and I welcome sleep.

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I wake up to a consistent beeping and grumble under my breath, batting at the alarm on my bedside table until it shuts the hell up. With a groan I sit up and brush my tangled curls back, well aware I look more swamp monster than princess.

I move my legs from under the covers and place my feet on the wooden floor, crossing over to my drawer to change into my outfit for the day. A striped cropped tee, overalls, and a simple pair of converse. I leave my room to brush my teeth, laughing when I beat Dustin to it.

When my teeth are minty fresh and I've geled my hair so it's in a slicked up ponytail with wavy - not curly, wavy - ends I open the cabinet and stand on the tips of my toes to reach the top shelf. I pull down the two little containers and pop off the tops, sticking one pill from each into my mouth and lowering my head to drink from the faucet. See, I've got something called depression and anxiety. It's become more popularly diagnosed, and my therapist is always telling me not to be ashamed, but it's still irritating. I hate the fact that there are still days when I get sad and want to curl up and hide in my bed. I hate that the thought of someone leaving me gets my heart pumping nervously, that the walls start to close in. But most of all I hate that it's because I let my dad win when it comes to my mental health.

The bastard doesn't get to win, so why am I the one fighting to hold myself together? Because I can't not fight. Not if it means stressing out my mom and alienating my brother.

At his insistent knocking I open the door and let him in. "Thank you, Jesus Christ." He watches as I put away my pills and close the cabinet, but he doesn't say anything about it.

"Sorry, Dusty. See you in the kitchen!" I ruffle his curls and leave the bathroom to go back to my room, shrugging on my green and white varsity-style jacket and grabbing my duffle bag and backpack.

My mom's pattering away in the kitchen, bacon still sizzling as she removes it from the pan, and pancakes set up on a plate by the stove. I grab an empty one and grab some grub, drizzling syrup all over the pancakes and kissing my mom's cheek. I sit at the table and dig in, waiting for my brother to hurry the hell up. A coffee mug is placed in front of me and I thank my mom, practically chugging the caffeine as Dustin comes sauntering in wearing his usual hat and green hoodie.

"Good morning mom, milady." He bows at us and our mother

brightens.

"Hello, Dusty." She presses kisses all over his face and I laugh as he squirms. It'd be normal for any child to be jealous of their sibling being treated like the baby, the apple of their parents' eye. But Dustin's my favorite, too, and I do the same thing.

I watch as he shoves everything into his face, way too used to his horrible eating habits to actually be disgusted. In fact, I'd be worried if he didn't eat like that.

As mom talks to Dustin about his explicit language issue, I wash down my meal with a glass of water and go to the bathroom to brush my teeth again. By the time I'm back, Dustin has finished and is standing up, giving my mom a big hug while Mews watches us from his spot on the kitchen window, eyes narrowed at me in judgment. I narrow my eyes right back, only prevented from hissing when my mom pulls me into a hug.

"Have a good lesson! I love you."

"Love you too. I'll see you tonight." I pull away from her warm body and pick up my bags, grabbing my keys from the bowl. "Dustin, c'mon. Time to hit the road!"

"You both have money for lunch, right?" My mom calls to us as we walk to my car, and I open the trunk so Dustin can shove his bike in.

"I do. Dustin?" I ask.

"Yeah - *son of a bitch* - YEAH!" He calls, slamming the trunk closed. I look up at the sky in mock irritation, laughing as he jumps into the passenger side with unbridled enthusiasm. I blow a kiss to my mom and get behind the wheel, tossing my duffle into the back seat and carefully backing out of the driveway. I turn in the direction of our schools, leaving our waving mother behind.

"Is Troy still bothering you?" I ask after a couple of moments of silence.

Dustin snorts. "When doesn't he? His sole purpose in life is to mess with us."



"I could talk to him." I hum.

But my brother only shakes his head and takes one of my hands. "It's my battle to fight, Ice Queen of Hawkins. But should we need our Huntress, we shall call upon thee." He remarks in a horrendous British accent. I only snort and make a turn.

"Maybe you'd be picked on less if you stopped talking like that."

"I thought you said it was cute." He mutters, and I give him my special "Dustin only" smile.

"It is. But having you not be traumatized by assholes in school is even cuter, buddy."

"Aren't you the one who said trauma is a part of life."

"For me, kid." I shake my head. "Not for you."

"What the hell does that mean?"

"You're my brother, Dustin. My little brother. It's my job to look out for you."

"We're supposed to look out for each other." He tells me.

But I don't respond. I simply pulling into a spot between the middle school and high school campuses. Removing my keys from the ignition I stare out the window. "Get to class, Dustin. Tell the Party I said hi."

"Okay." He kisses my cheek and gets out of the car, and I unlock the trunk so he can pull out his bike and ride down the hill to school.

I fold my arms onto my steering wheel and put my forehead on them.

*Deep breath in. Deep breath out. Deep breath in. Deep breath out. Calm your mind.*

I lift my head and steel my features.

Time to be the Ice Queen of Hawkins.

I get out and close the door with my usual indifferent attitude. I'm a different person when I'm around other people. People who aren't my brother, mom, or best friend. Even with the younger kids my brother is close with, there's that wall I put up. It's gotten me a reputation, my attitude. I've been the Ice Queen since my freshman year, after Carol and her goons tried to beat down on me verbally. I simply stared and with all the coldness I felt about my dad, unleashed harsh words in a soothing, chilling voice, watching as they backed away. The halls started to part for me, and those who lack any stubbornness or backbone refused to approach me. Which is great, because those kind of people are the assholes who bully the "freaks."

Well, the Ice Queen is a freak of nature, and she protects her freaks. Protects them from people like Carol and Tommy H., who are probably going to peak in high school. She protects them from assholes like Steven Harrington. King Steve, rich boy extraordinaire. He's hot, yeah, and I've liked him since I was a freshman, but my liking him doesn't take away from the fact he's a douchebag of the highest order, and that there's clearly something wrong with my mind if I have deep feelings for a guy like Steve "The Hair" Harrington.

Seriously. It's thick and poofy and definitely has ten products in it, at least.

I walk towards the school with my backpack slung over one shoulder, looking around for my best friend's car. Weird. Jonathan's never late to meet me. Maybe he's by our locker's?

I walk into the school, and people blocking my path move out of the way. It's not like I dress super imposing. I'm 5'2" on a good day - I mean, Dustin's like, my height - and I only wear heels occasionally. My style is preppy-borderline-grunge minus the heavy make up, and revealing clothes are saved for summer or especially warm days.

Again, it's all about the attitude. Especially if "biker chic" isn't your style. At first, I was cold. Frozen. In my walk, in my tone, in how I looked at people. Especially that first week of high school. But all that's only good for attracting people, I've found. Like your something to figure out. Well I don't want to be figured out. I don't want people to look behind the curtain and realize I'm not for them. So I learned

how to make people fear me. Anger isn't all that scares people, thought it's a good start. What's truly terrifying is the calm before the storm, the light snowfall before the harsh blizzard. So my chilling, frozen attitude morphed into cool indifference, unless provoked. When provoked, the coldness comes in the form of soft but sharp words, a biting look when I overhear something that shouldn't be said.

Jonathan isn't at our lockers - we're neighbors - so I open mine and shove my bag in, grabbing only what I need for the first half of the day while also tossing in my jacket. That's when a shadow looms next to me, and I look up at one of the people who've weathered the storm that is Veronica Leigh Henderson.

"Good morning, Smarties." Barb Holland greets, red hair even more orange in the morning light and glasses thick.

Smarties, for my favorite candy.

I give her a small smile, not one large enough to crack my wall, and straighten. "Morning, Barb. Where's Nance?" I ask, looking for her usual companion.

Barb rolls her eyes. "She probably had a late night."

"With who?" I ask as we start to walk down the hall, and more students step aside to allow us to pass.

"You didn't hear?" I shake my head. "Steve's been chasing after her. I'm totally jealous, but also, like, gag me with a spoon."

"Right." I nod, my mind going a little blank. I can sort of hear Barb talking about them, but the noise around me is coming out muffled.

Steve and Nancy. Nancy and Steve.

God, I'm being ridiculous.

I shake myself out of my stupor - let Nancy have the jerk - and listen to Barb. "- and we were supposed to study over the phone last night, but she hung up because he was going to call her!"

"And you didn't call me?"

"You were at work." Barb tells me, confused.

"I'd rather have studied than been there. Goddamn Mark and his smoking. Seriously, if the pay wasn't good, I'd leave."

She snorts. "No you wouldn't. You love that place."

"Yeah, I really do." I mutter.

Down the hall, we see Nancy walking to her locker. She's a petite girl, the smallest I've ever seen. She rivals Audrey Hepburn in body types. No wonder guys like Steve go after her. She's dainty and picture-perfect, even with her flaws.

Don't get me wrong, I've dated a lot of guys. I like my body. Athletic, a little curvy, toned muscles. Slim, not skinny, and I still have some meat on my bones. But when you've liked a guy for two years and he ends up going after your friend, despite your constant fighting, well, that can sort of take a hit at your confidence meter. Especially when your best friend could literally be a model.

"So, did he call?" Barb excitedly asks Nancy Wheeler as she's about to open her locker. She looks around nervously.

"Keep your voice down!" She whispers, and I roll my eyes. Despite the war going on in my head, I stand on her other side.

"Well, did he?" I ask, speaking at a normal volume. She still looks nervous. "Relax. You seriously think anyone is going to try and listen in with me here?" She chews her lip, but calms down and sends me a dazzling smile.

"Thank you, Vera." I nod and gesture for her to answer. "I told you Barb, it's not like that." She looks up at our ginger friend before looking at me. "You won't tell anyone, right?"

"Jesus, Nance. I'm the secret keeper. Don't ask stupid questions." Even though she's a little taller than me, I feel like a giant compared to her.

"Okay, okay, sorry. I mean, yes, he likes me, but not like that. We just," she smiles and begins opening her locker, "made out a couple times."

"We just... made out a couple times." Barb mocks, and I laugh under my breath. "Nance, seriously. You're gonna be so cool now, it's ridiculous."

"Hey, I'm the cool one around here." I point out, tone light.

Nancy points at me, and nods in agreement towards Barb. "It's true. And I'm not."

"You better still hang out with me, that's all I'm saying. If you become friends with Tommy H. or Carol..."

"Oh, she better not." I warn, glaring at the back of Nancy's head.

"Gross." Nancy adds, and I nod proudly at her. She smiles and turns back to Barb, finally opening her locker. "Okay, I'm telling you. It was only a one time... two time thing."

I groan and roll my eyes. "Oh, gag me with a spoon."

She laughs, but suddenly stops, pulling out a slip of paper. As she opens it Barb and I look over her shoulder in interest.

Meet me. Bathroom. Steve.

"You were saying?" Barb asks, and I watch with a pit in my throat as Nancy smiles and closes her locker, bidding us farewell and rushing off. Barb and I stay where we are, watching her move through the crowd.

"She has it bad." Barb finally says, and I nod.

"Hey, have you seen Jonathan?" I ask.

Barb thinks then shakes her head, before a conspiring smile lights up her freckled face. "And why are you looking for him?"

"Because he's my best friend?"

"Ouch. Hurtful."

I roll my eyes. "What? I've known him since we were in diapers."

"I know, I know, but..."

I shake my head. "Nope, absolutely not. We are siblings. That's it. Can't guys and girls be best friends without wanting to get in each other's pants?" I gripe as we walk to our first class.

She shrugs. "Sure, I guess. But you've never even thought about it?"

I shake my head. "Never."

"And there's no guy? No one?"

"A Queen doesn't need a King. Elizabeth the First taught us that." I point out, opening the door for English. No one's in the room yet, giving us time to get our usual seats without issue. Center row, with me in the middle and Barb beside me. Jonathan's not in my class, having the next period, so maybe I'll see him then.

"Well, he wouldn't be your King. But still, you haven't been single this long, like, ever."

It's true. I've had a boyfriend ever since eighth grade, never for long though. Usually three months if he's an interesting dude. The longest relationship I've had is five months, with a junior named Harrison. I liked him and trusted him enough to lose my virginity to him in July, but then he moved a month later because his dad got transferred. I don't regret it, even though another person left me behind. It's easier to accept his leaving, because it wasn't his choice to go.

"Maybe I'm tired of quick things? Besides, the guys here suck."

Barb snorts. "Yeah, they really do."

I see her snort for what it is, though, and lean over to take her hand. "They're idiots, and there's gonna be a time when they look back and wish they asked you out."

"Right." She rolls her eyes.

"I'm serious." She looks at me. "You're beautiful. Way more beautiful than girls like Carol. And you're smart, funny, and kind."

"Thanks, Smarties." She whispers, and I let go of her hand. "You're really nice."

"Don't tell anyone. I have a reputation to maintain." I sniff, and she laughs, right as the class comes in. Nancy pushes past Ally with an apology to sit next to Barb, a blush on her cheeks as she does so. I swallow the pit and look ahead, waiting for class to start.

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It's lunch time, and Jonathan still hasn't made an appearance. I sit by myself in the corner of the cafeteria, ignoring the laughter and gossiping in favor of looking around for my best friend. "Missing your freak, princess?" A familiar voice asks. I tense and grab my fork, take a bite out of my salad and lifting an eyebrow. "Earth to Henderson, do you copy blonde Gremlin?"

"Harrington." I purr, voice even. "What can I do for you today?" I don't bother to look at him, I just keep eating my salad.

"You just looked lonely without Byers. Did you screw him too hard last night?" Tommy H. jumps at the chance to take a crack at me to gain more respect points from Steve.

I turn around in my seat, looking up at King Steve's freckled best friend. "Tommy, Tommy, Tommy." I tut, voice soft and sharp. The rest of the cafeteria goes a little silent when they notice what's happening. "Every week, you try this shit. And every week it doesn't work. When are you going to learn, Tommy-boy?"

"When you realize you're not shit." Carol responds for her boytoy, and I look up at her.

"Not shit'. Like, I don't suck? Thanks, already knew that."

"You're just a sophomore bitch with daddy issues." She tells me, but it's an overused insult. "No wonder the only guy you've kept around is Byers. His daddy walked out on him, too, right?"

"Carol." I say, voice even sharper. Cooler. Carol takes a step back as I

show my teeth. "Did you have a brain tumor for breakfast? Because I distinctly remember telling you only last week that your insults lack substance and are frankly disappointing. Probably like Tommy, right? Is that why you're such a bitch? Bad lay?" Tommy glowers, and I focus my icy glare on him, smiling internally when he backs off. "I wasn't talking to you. In fact, I was done talking to you. Because you're boring, and in two years when you maybe cross that stage and get your diploma, you'll all be stuck here," I look up briefly at Steve, too, but he doesn't move back, not like his lackies, "and the rest of us? We'll have moved on from high school. Get out of my face. Before it gets worse for you." I warn, and watch as they walk away, towards the lunch line.

See, I may be popular because people are afraid of me, but that doesn't stop those three assholes from trying to take me down literally every Monday. It's a damn tradition. A whole "there isn't enough room in this place for the four of us" routine. Blegh. Morons.

The cafeteria returns to its regularly scheduled gossip hour and I turn back around, continuing to eat.

"Ms. Henderson!" A voice calls, and I look up in confusion as the school principal approaches my table.

"Principal Murphy, what's -" I start to ask.

She smiles reassuringly. "Don't worry, you're not in trouble. Your mom needs to talk to you."

I nod. "Okay, sure. Do I need to -"

"Come with me." I stand up and follow her out, sending Nancy and Barb confused looks as I go. I catch Steve staring and glare at him until he looks away.

Murphy leads me into her office, where I find Chief Hopper waiting with Officer Callahan and my brother? "What's going on?" I ask, looking at the adults, cool but confused.

"Don't worry, Robin Hood. You aren't in trouble." The "not yet" goes unspoken but the Chief of Police. He talks before my brother can, and



I hold open my arms. Dustin dashes into them, wrapping his arms around me while I nod.

"You said my mom wanted me to call?" I ask, and Principal Murphy holds out the black handset. I hold it to my ear as the principal dials my mom's number, and wait for her to pick up.

"This is Claudia Henderson."

"Mom, what's going on?" I ask, masking my nervousness.

"Oh, thank goodness! Joyce Byers called, it seems Will didn't come home from work. Chief Hopper just asked the boys some questions about it, but I'm worried about Dusty." I feel like the rug has been pulled out from underneath me and I stagger, holding Dustin a little tighter as his shoulders shake. "I spoke to Karen who said she was getting Will, but I have a couple of meetings and can't leave the office. Do you think you can bring him home? Do you have a test? Because I can -"

"Mom, mom, it's fine. I'll ask Nancy or Barb to pick up my stuff. It's fine." I calm her down, rubbing Dustin's shoulder. "What time will you be home, because I can cancel my lesson?"

I hear her sigh in relief, and swallow my tears when I hear how shuddery her breathing is. "No, you don't have to. I'll be home by 3:30. Thank you. Thank you, sweetheart. I have to go. I love you. Can you call me when you get back?"

"Yes. I promise. I'll call. I love you, too." I hand the phone back to Murphy and pull Dustin in closer. "I've got you. I've got you." I whisper as his shoulders shake. I look up at Hopper. "Thanks, Chief."

He pats my shoulder and leaves the room with Callahan. "You'll be excused from the rest of your classes, Ms. Henderson." Principal Murphy reassures me, and I give her a rare soft smile.

"Thanks. C'mon, let's get you home. Is your bike outside?" I ask, awkwardly walking with him attached to me.

"Yeah. Hopper said to bring it with me." He whispers. I nod and blink back tears, stopping by the cafeteria. Dustin is still holding onto me,

so I sigh and pull him in with me, daring someone to say something with my usual cool glare. They look away, though I'm sure they're wondering what a middle schooler is doing here.

I walk over to Nancy and Barb, clearing my throat when they choose to focus on Dustin. "Can one of you please grab my homework? I've got to take him home."

"Of course, yeah." Barb answers.

"Is everything okay?" Nancy asks.

I nod my head, still dazed. Will is missing. Will is missing. My best friend's little brother is missing. "He's just feeling sick and mom can't pick him up. Thank you." I tell them, waving as I drag Dustin out of the cafeteria. I notice Tommy H. about to open his mouth. "Say something and I'll rip off your two inch dick and feed it to you in little pieces." I warn, voice blank of any emotion. He closes his mouth and I keep walking, my brother not letting go, not even when I open my locker and grab my bag and jacket.

"Hold on, we're almost outside." I whisper, and as soon as the cool air hits us I nudge him to get his bike. We walk over to my car together and toss it in the back before getting in the car.

I haven't even started the car when Dustin begins sobbing. Silent tears fall down my cheeks, too, and I pull him into me, knocking off his hat to run my fingers through his curls. "I've got you. I've got you." I mutter, head on top of his. "I'm sorry, I'm so sorry."

"We should have ridden home with him." Dustin guilty bemoans, but I shake my head. "What... what if he's dead? What if he was taken?"

"Stop it! He isn't dead!" I shout, forcing Dustin to look at me. "Will Byers is too smart to be dead. They'll find him!"

"What if his dad took him?" Dustin whispers.

I bite my lip. "Then Jonathan and I will watch as Joyce goes after him with an axe." *Jonathan. Oh my God, Jonathan.* I have to call him. How could I have not realized something was wrong? He never misses school! "Will is going to be fine. Okay?"

"Promise?"

Honesty is our rule. But this is different. "I promise."

*Please, God, tell me I haven't lied to my brother.*

I start the car and peel out of my spot, leaving our schools in the dust. The rest of the ride passes in silence, Dustin still sniffing and me breathing heavily to stop the flow of tears.

Will Byers is a sweet kid. The sweetest. Dustin's sweet too, but there's this innocence to the youngest Byers. He doesn't curse, he's soft and kind. He doesn't raise his voice in an argument. In fact, he hates arguments. I babysit for him, when Joyce and Jonathan are both working. Free of charge, because I'm not taking money from my best friend's family.

We watch TV together, and he even taught me about Dungeons and Dragons, because let's face it Will is a lot more patient than my brother and their best friends. And when Lonnie left, he turned to me. Well, he and Jonathan, because they had already seen me go through something similar. They're like brothers to me. And now Will's missing and Jonathan's probably running around worried sick, finding a way to blame himself because that's what he always does when something goes wrong, but it's never his fault.

A small hand taking my own pulls me up from the depths of my thoughts, and I realize I've pulled into our driveway without even noticing.

"You're breathing too hard. Are you panicking?" Dustin asks, wiping away tears. I shake my head and kiss his forehead, then grab his hat and place it on his head.

"C'mon. We'll go inside and watch *A New Hope*. Okay? You just have to let me make a couple of calls first."

"Okay." He whispers, sniffing as he leaves the car with his backpack in his hand. I grab my own bag as well as the duffle, figuring I'll just bike to my lesson, and grab Dustin's bike from the trunk, walking it over to its usual spot.

My little brother waits by the front door so I let us in, locking the door behind me. I toss my keys in the bowl and shove my bags to the side as well as my coat, untying my shoes. Dustin's already gotten rid of his jacket and sneakers and his folded onto the couch, Mews climbing on his lap. I don't have it in me to continue my battle with the cat and instead go over to the phone. I call our mom, first, reassuring her that we're fine and that I'm distracting Dustin with a movie. As soon as she hangs up I hover my hands over the numbers, taking a few moments before I dial the Byers home.

"Hello? Will?" Joyce Byers asks, frantic. I wince.

"No, sorry. It's... it's Veronica. I wanted to check in. On you and Jonathan."

"Oh, dear. Thank you. Have you heard from him? Have you seen him?"

I shake my head, willing my tears to freeze up. "No. I'm so sorry Joyce, I haven't. Listen, I have archery today. But afterwards, I can come and see you both for a bit? If you'd like."

"Thank you. Thank you, dear. Oh, Jonathan's here. I'll... I'll let you two speak."

I hear the phone rustle a bit before another breath comes through. "Ver?" A weak voice asks, and I force my hand over my mouth at how broken my best friend sounds.

"I'm here." I finally promise. "I'm here. Jonathan, I'm here for you. I told your mom I'd come over later, after my lesson. Okay?"

"Thank you. Wh-what did I miss, at school? Why aren't you at school? Are you okay?"

"I'm fine, John. I'm fine." I reassure him. "School was school. Boring. Hopper talked to Mike, Lucas, and D. Dustin... he's shaken. I took him home for mom. We're gonna watch Star Wars."

"*Empire* or *A New Hope*?" Jonathan asks, and I take the distraction bait for his sake.

"A *New Hope*. We'll do *Empire* after."

"And then archery. And then you're coming here?"

"Yeah, promise."

I can hear a door opening on the other end of the line. "I gotta go. My mom..."

"Okay, okay. I'll see you later." He hangs up, and I'm left with a beeping phone.

Yeah. Yeah, you will.

---

"You aren't focusing, Henderson!" Craig tells me, watching as my sixtieth arrow of the lesson punctures the penultimate center ring. I haven't gotten a single bullseye.

"Sorry. A lot on my mind."

"What did we say, kiddo? Focus on what's ahead, not behind." He points at my eyes, then the target. I nod and notch another arrow, drawing and breathing in as I fire. The arrow soars through the air, landing just outside the center. I narrow my eyes, veins freezing. Usually I only miss when I mean to. "This is about Will Byers, isn't it?" Craig asks.

"How'd you know about that?" I ask, getting back into position and breathing as I release the string. A little closer.

"Everyone knows. Hopper's probably going to put a search party together. He's already asked Mark and me to be on standby, just in case. To help track."

"I can track, too." I tell him, notching another arrow but not drawing, choosing instead to focus on my teacher.

"Better than most."

"I know the woods like the back of my hand." It's true. I've been camping in and exploring them since I was five, and even when my

dad took off I refused to stop.

"Again, better than most. But there's a curfew, and I doubt Claudia will let you go."

I nod. "Yeah, you're right. Still, I can help."

"You can start by focusing. You're no good if you're letting the world weigh down on you."

"Will's my little brother. Not by blood, but he's still my little brother."

"And he'd be pretty disappointed in your archery skills." I glower at Craig. "It's true. You know it is. Remember how impressed he was the first time you brought him."

I smile at the memory, thinking about the soft spoken boy clapping and cheering me on, his unpaid babysitter-sister.

"Yeah."

"So focus on the good, not the bad shit." I nod at his order and breath, then look ahead.

As always, I pull back with just the right amount of force, a pleased smile on my face as the arrow flies true, hitting the bullseye. I smile in relief and calmly set down my bow, looking up at one of my dad's former friends. He lost them all, when he pulled his "screwing the secretary then divorcing his wife then marrying his mistress" shit. I consider that a personal win for me, that I got to keep the people he wanted to. "See? You did it. Don't let yourself get trapped in your head. I know that's easier said than done, but you're always at your best when you remember that, Ice Queen." I roll my eyes at the nickname. I pretty much tell Craig everything. He's like an uncle to me.

"That's reserved for the students."

"Mhmm, sure. Go on, class is ending early today. Go comfort Jonathan." I smile and dash over to the target, pulling out the arrows and picking up the ones I simply dropped on the ground in the initial removal processes. Giving Craig a salute and shoving everything into

my duffle I get into my car and drive towards the Byers house.

It's pretty much at the edge of the woods, secluded and worn down. Joyce isn't as lucky as my mom, who has a good job as bookkeeper and earns a steady enough paycheck to comfortably provide for her family. Joyce works at Melvald's General Store as a retail clerk. I park in between her car and Jonathan's and run to the front door, carefully knocking. Joyce answers, eyes a little swollen and red as she immediately pulls me into a hug and my normal walls open up for her, my second mother. "Joyce." I whisper, hugging her closer. "I'm so sorry. We'll find him."

"I know, I know we will. Thank you for coming. Jonathan's in the living room making posters." She lets go of me and I nod.

"Okay, I'm going to help him. And when we're done, I'll make dinner. I'm sure you haven't eaten yet."

"I-I couldn't stop."

"Joyce, I know. Let me worry about the food, okay?" She nods, then smiles.

"Thank you, dear. I'm so glad you came." I smile back at her and squeeze her shoulder as I walk over to where Jonathan is sitting, shoulders tense and face more gaunt than usual. Before he can stop me I throw my smaller frame onto him, uncaring if I knock him off balance.

"Ver, what -"

"Shh. This is rare show of affection. Let me hug you." I mutter. He laughs, a little broken, and pulls me closer. We just hold each other for a few moments until he shifts away from me.

"Thanks, rockstar." I bite my lip. "You here to take care of us?"

"Absolutely. You're family, John." I squeeze his hand briefly then let go. "Now hand me a marker. You and I both know which one of us has the better penmanship."

He rolls his eyes but hands me a Sharpie. I uncap it and follow his

wording, the only sounds filling the house are the scratches as we write. That is, until Joyce tries to call Lonnie, her ex-husband.

And, as is typical with that man, he doesn't pick up. Someone else does, though. "Can you please put him on?... Who is this?" Joyce asks, and I briefly look up at the tense woman. "Cynthia... Cynthia, this is Joyce... Lonnie's ex-wife... I really need to speak to him - Can you please put him - no. No, not later, now!" She slams the phone down to hang it up. "Bitch!"

"Mom." Jonathan calls.

"What?" She yells back, but neither one of us jumps.

"You have to stay calm."

Joyce chuckles to herself then picks up the phone once more, redialing. I set down the paper I was writing on to go walk over to her as she calls her ex. "Lonnie. Some teenager just hung up on me. Will is... is missing. I don't know where he is. I need... her voice breaks. I just need you to call me back, please, just -" I can hear the line disconnecting from where I'm standing and watch with a heavy heart as Joyce slams the phone twice. "Damn it, damn it!"

I pull her into a hug, hoping to anchor her. It seems to be working, at least a bit, because she breathes a little easier.

"Mom?" Jonathan calls, and we break apart.

"What?"

"Cops." He announces, standing up. Joyce jogs over to the front door and opens it, the three of us standing on the front porch and watching as Hopper comes out from behind his car, damaged blue bike in his hands as Callahan and Powell get out of their smaller car.

I swallow and catch Jonathan as he stumbles back, staring sadly at Hopper. He gives me a small nod before refocusing on Joyce.

"We found it, in the woods. Can we talk inside?" He asks, the usually gruff man a little softer when speaking to the distraught mother. Joyce nods and leads us all back into the house, and I close the door



behind the cops, leaning against it and staring at their backs.

"It was just lying there?" Joyce asks.

Hopper nods, and begins to walk around. "Yeah. Cal?" He points towards the bedrooms and the dark-skinned cop follows his order. Powell's always been the smarter one of him and his partner. Callahan... well, there are times when Steve is smarter than him.

"Was there any blood on it, or -"

"No, no, no, no, no..." Hopper reassures Joyce, looking around. "Phil?" I follow them as they walk around the house, Jonathan asking,

"If you found the bike out there, why are you here?"

"Well, he had a key to the house, right?" Hopper asks, and I've honestly never seen him in full-cop mode before now.

"Yeah." Jonathan answers.

"So... maybe he came home."

This has Joyce up a wall. "Yo-you think I didn't check my own house?" She stammers.

"I'm not saying that."

"Chief Hopper, please. Throw us a bone." I actually plead, which gets his attention. I don't plead, not with adults. Not anymore.

He nods. "Alright. Okay." Then his eyes narrow and he touches a small dent in the wood paneling by the door. "Has this always been here?"

"What? I don't know." Joyce looks at him in disbelief. "I mean, I have two boys. Look at this place."

"You're not sure?" He asks again, opening the door and showing the scruff matches where the doorknob hits.

Chester, the Byers dog, suddenly starts barking and Hopper goes out to investigate, Joyce right behind him. With the two adults outside and the other two cops exploring the house I pull Jonathan into a hug, standing in the middle of the kitchen.

We're still holding each other when Joyce comes back in with Chester, the dog circling us as Joyce joins our hug, the cops moving around us.

Finally, Hopper comes back with his two subordinates. "Joyce, we're putting together a search party. We're going to find him, alright?" The passion in his voice, well, it's strong. And it makes me hopeful.

Because Hopper lost a kid. His daughter. Everyone in town knows, cause, well, small towns. Cancer. She was six. He won't let Joyce go through that pain, too, and the thought of that makes me smile inside.

Hang on, Will. We're coming for you.

---

I left the Byers house at 8:30, long after the sun had set. I managed to put together some pasta, a salad, and garlic bread, because the first thing my mom taught me after my dad left was how to cook. They sent me off with hugs and kisses, promising to call if they heard anything.

With my mom part of Will's search party I drive home as carefully as possible, not wanting to Dustin to be on his own. But when I park the car in front of the house, I see him straddling his bike, backpack on. "Hey, where the hell are you going?" I ask, slamming the car door behind me and making him jump.

"Veronica, I -"

"Let me guess. You and your buddies are itching to go on your own search? Look for Will in Mirkwood?" He gulps and nods, not even bothering to lie. "Let me get my bike. You have an extra flashlight?"

"Yeah. Yes."

I nod. "Okay." I brush past him to unlock my bike. "I can't believe you

thought you were leaving without my supervision. What if you had gotten hurt? Huh? What then?" For once, my blood isn't running cold. It's burning with fear and anger. I can't lose my brother.

"Sorry, I'm sorry." He apologizes, and I nod before slapping him up the head.

"Dumbass. Hang on." I lower my bike and go back to my car to pull my bow and quiver out of my bag, setting them on my back. They're only practice arrows, yeah, but they can still do damage in case something comes after us. "Alright. Time to go save your Wizard."

Dustin smiles at me, showing his growing teeth. "As you command, Huntress." We ride out into the night, turning the lights on our bikes on as we do so.

Lucas and Mike join us halfway to Mirkwood. It isn't really Mirkwood, which is a fictional forest made up by Tolkien, though it does look like it. Mirkwood is really where the roads Cornwallis and Keerley meet, by the Hawkins National Laboratory.

As we ride, Mike starts griping at me. "I saw Steve Harrington sneaking into Nancy's room on my way here. Can't you do your whole 'Ice Queen' thing and scare him off?"

"Hey, he's Nancy's bad decision to make, alright?" I calmly tell him. "But if he hurts her, yeah, I'll do it. Now focus, Will takes precedence over Hairy Harrington."

Lucas snorts and we do a quick fist bump as we keep riding, but all merriment fades when we reach our starting point.

Mirkwood is creepy. Seriously. Super creepy. Especially at night.

"Ah man, this is it." Lucas mutters.

"Hey guys, you feel that?" My little brother asks as the sky rumbles, and sure enough a few drops of rain plop down onto my varsity jacket. "I think maybe we should go back."

Before I can agree, Mike speaks up. "No. We're not going back. Just stay close. Come on."

"Hey, wait a second." I stop the Wheeler boy from moving. "We go when I say we go. Do you all have your walkies set?"

"Channel six." Mike promises, and Lucas and Dustin wave their own devices at me. I nod.

"Fine, alright, come on." I duck under the abysmal police tape and wait for the boys to follow me. Dustin tosses me a flashlight as we dump our bikes, and I tuck it so it rests on my shoulder, held down by the strap of my quiver. I also notch an arrow to my bow, waiting for the boys to be ready. "Stay close to me. If something happens, you three run to your bikes and ride to the police station. You get Flo to walkie Hopper, and tell him what happened. Do you understand?" I order in a chilling voice, the three boys nodding at me fearfully despite the fact they're all almost my height. "You ride to Flo, and you do not play hero."

"Okay."

"Got it."

"Promise, Leia." Mike, Lucas, and Dustin agree. I nod and giving them a soothing smile.

"Good. C'mon."

We march through the woods, the boys sounding like a herd of elephants compared to my soft, well practiced footsteps. Like I said, I know these woods very well. They're my second home.

The farther we walk, the heavier the rain falls. I'm gratefully my hair is still in it's pony, but I keep having to wipe the cold liquid from my face and my fingers are starting to cramp on my bow. I can feel my teeth chattering, too, but it isn't as loud as Lucas and Mike's.

Irony, right? The Ice Queen is freezing.

"Will?"

"Byers!" Mike and Lucas yell as they walk a few feet away from Dustin and I, covering the other side of Mirkwood without trailing too far off.

"Will!" I yell. "Buddy, come on!"

"I've got your *X-Men 134*!" I roll my eyes at Dustin's attempt, but it also puts a small smile on my face. That's Will's favorite issue. He's shown me it enough times, when I'm watching him. "Guys, I really think we should turn back."

"Seriously, Dustin? You wanna be a baby, then go home already." I stop walking to turn and glare at Lucas.

"Watch it, Sinclair." He nods at my icy tone. "But seriously Dustin, shut up."

"I'm just being realistic!" Dustin tells me. "Which is your job, by the way, because all you are is realistic, and you're choosing now to be an optimist!"

I wince internally at the harshness in Dustin's tone, but I don't fight back. It's the truth, after all. I'm not who I used to be. I haven't been for four years, though it comes out sometimes. "Dustin, I know you're scared." I soothe, replacing coldness with warmth. "But I'm here, and I won't let anything happen to you. Okay?" He nods and we keep walking.

"Did you ever think Will went missing because he ran into something bad, and we're going the exact same spot where he was last seen?" Dustin finally asks, practically roaring it over the rain. I nod, fingers clenching tighter around my weapon.

"Why do you think I brought the bow?" I ask in response, not looking back at him.

A sudden rustle and crunch has me stopping, and quick as humanly possible I lift my bow in the direction of the noise, the boys behind me.

"What?" Dustin asks, and Mike shushes him.

There's another rustle and I shift my body around, changing my weight and stance. Nothing. Nothing is there.

Then, something screeches. The boys stand aside as I point my arrow

in the direction we've been walking from, only to see trees.

When my younger companions gasp I turn around, arrow pointed directly at a little kid's forehead. Their feet are bare and they're only wearing a big yellow shirt.

So I narrow my eyes and walk closer, lowering my bow. The kid stumbles and I catch them, and up close I can take in their features. Soft, feminine.

*Oh my God. It's a girl.*

## 2. The Weirdo on Maple Street

Hi all, and welcome to my *Stranger Things* Steve Harrington/OC story! It's been a long, long time coming. Seriously. Since 2017 long.

I just updated the first chapter, so this is a little different than the original I posted. In this story, we've got the Ice Queen of Hawkins, the older-but-shorter-by-season 2 sister of Dustin Henderson, because he deserves an older sibling. She's Veronica, and even though *Heathers* came out in 1989 I've taken the liberty of borrowing some of my favorite quotes because Winona Ryder Easter Eggs. Seriously, I cannot overstate my love for that movie. Anyway, there's more of a backstory for the Henderson family, including adding the dad to the "asshole fathers club", co-president with Lonnie Byers, the prick. Expect explicit language because, hello, *Stranger Things* isn't known for censoring language.

Fair warning, while this is Steve/OC the season 2 part will include Billy/OC, but not for long. I promise. He's a great villain, but he's a dick until he isn't. Just wanted to get that out of the way. Because again, he's a dick. But I'm also treating their relationship a bit like Jackson Whittemore and Lydia Martin's from *Teen Wolf*, especially with the later outcome. And there will also be inbetween chapters between ST 1 and ST 2, then ST 2 and ST 3, adding some more things as well as a deeper dive into how Max and Billy's relationship changes, because let's be honest that wasn't really commented on in ST 3, and I'd like to see it. But this will not be a Billy Hargrove/OC endgame story. Not like that.

Alright, this second chapter is a bit of a journey, and it ends at a cliffhanger because I'm evil. It follows 1x02, and I'll be keeping it pretty canon.

Enjoy the story! I only own Veronica.

---

After about an hour, we made it to Mike's house with the girl sitting

behind him, holding on for dear life. The lights were off in all the rooms but we didn't want to chance any noise our soaking clothes and shoes would make, so we snuck in through the garage and made our way down to the basement.

I wrap the girl in a blanket and sit down next to her, rubbing my hands on her arms to help warm her as she shivers. "Is there a number we can call, for your parents?" Mike asks her.

"Where's your hair? Do you have cancer?"

"*Dustin.*" I warn, and he throws out his hands.

"I was just asking!"

"Did you run away?" Lucas asks.

I look at the girl and she stares at me, panic on her face. "Are you in some kind of trouble?"

"Is that blood?" Lucas asks, leaning forward to the red blotch, but Mike slaps his hand away.

"Stop it! You're freaking her out!"

"She's freaking me out!"

"I bet she's deaf!" Dustin leans forward and claps loudly before I can even stop him, the girl jumping into me and then flinching at the contact. "Not deaf."

"Alright, enough. She's cold and scared." I tell the boys, my usual babysitter command in my voice. "Mikey, can you get her some clothes?"

"Don't call me that." He grumbles, but does as I ask, pulling out a dry outfit from the laundry basket and bringing it over as the girl flinches at the rumbling thunder. "Here, these are clean. Okay?"

She takes them and stands up, removing her blanket. Then her hands creep lower, to tug up at the hem of her shirt, and we all jump and stop her.



"Whoa! No, no." I reach down to gently remove her hands while the boys jump away, freaking out.

"No, no!" Mike adds, joining me while Dustin yells,

"Oh my God, oh my God!" Turning around with Lucas and covering their faces.

"See, over there? Th-that's the bathroom." Mike stammers, and I put my hand on the girl's shoulder. "Privacy. Get it?"

"C'mon. I'll check for injuries, okay?" She nods and gives me a small smile, just a lift of her lips, but it's something.

I lead her into the basement bathroom, Mike following us. As he starts to close the door, she panics again and stops him. "You don't want it closed?"

"No." She whispers.

Mike starts to perk up, and honestly I'm a little relieved to. "Oh. So you can speak. Okay, well... Um, how about we just keep the door..." they look at each other and slowly close the door so it's open about three inches, "just like this."

The girl nods and I hear Mike walking away. Gently lifting the hem of the girl's shirt, she seems to understand my body language enough to bring it up over her head, the wet fabric landing on the floor with a plop. Her underwear is mostly dry, so I decide to keep it on her as I silently turn her body, taking in any bruises or cuts. She has a couple of purple marks on her thighs, a few on her shoulders, but she doesn't seem to be injured. Not in the way she should be. Her feet are scratched up, though, so I gesture for her to sit on the toilet while I pull some bandaids and rubbing alcohol from the cabinet.

"This is going to sting, alright?"

"Yes." She whispers, nodding. I dampen a washcloth with the alcohol and carefully clean the cuts on her feet, closing my eyes as she whimpers.

"Hey, hey." She starts to panic and kicks her legs a bit. "I'm sorry. I'm

really sorry. But we don't want it infected. You could get really sick, okay?" She nods and grabs my free hand, squeezing everytime I press the cloth to her feet. Finally I put on the bandaids as well as a pair of fluffy white socks, then carefully help her stand. We put on the large black shirt and sweatpants with ease, and as soon as we exit the bathroom the boys stop talking.

I gesture for the girl to sit on the couch while Will sets up a little fort. "So, what's the plan? Should I call the station? I should call the station." I mutter to myself.

"And what, tell them you took us looking for Will? Our mom's will kill us."

"Alcatraz." Dustin backs up Lucas, and I sigh.

"Yeah. Yeah. But *honesty*, Dustin."

He glares. "It's okay to lie, Veronica. You don't always have to follow that rule."

"I do lie. But not to you, or to mom. We follow that rule so mom doesn't get hurt again." I narrow my eyes at him.

"Yeah, well, this time we're lying to protect our asses."

I glare but choose to focus on Mike. "So, what's your plan?"

"Tomorrow I'll leave for school, then sneak her outside. She'll ring the doorbell, mom will see there's a missing child, and she'll handle it."

I bite my lip and nod, rubbing the three studs on my right earlobe, a nervous habit. "Okay. But if anything goes wrong -"

"Call you. I know." He huffs. I roll my eyes and ruffle his wet locks, then go to the fort where the girl has crawled in.

"Hey. You'll be fine. Okay?"

"Okay." She nods. I give her a soft smile then brush past my brother and Lucas, still pissed at him. I wait for the boys at the top of the stairs, and we go back through the garage to jump on our bikes. We

ride together for a bit, until Dustin and I branch off to our house.

I'm still ignoring him when we reach the front door, opening it for him while I grab my duffle to shove my bow and arrows inside.

Thankfully mom still isn't home, so I toss the keys angrily into the bowl and take off my shoes so the wet soles don't mess up her carpet. Dustin tries to talk to me but I slam my bedroom door, irritated.

Doesn't he get it? What lying can do? It builds, and builds, and builds, until suddenly you forget your wife and daughter said they'll come see you at work, and the little girl opens the door to see her dad in between some blonde lady's legs. That's what lying does, it tears families apart, even if they start of innocent.

---

The next morning is awkward. Mom can tell we're fighting, and attempts to break the tension until she eventually stops. And why does she stop? Because Will hasn't been found yet, "But that doesn't mean we're giving up, darlings. We'll find him."

Naturally I'm in a sour mood as I slam the car door behind me, my brother having decided to ride to school on his back rather than with me. My chest feels heavy. Dustin and I never fight. We argue, but we don't cut down on each other in a genuine way.

His words haunt me as I drive. I'm right, right? Honesty is important. Lying gets you in trouble, no matter how small. It's a slippery slope.

So why do I feel so guilty?

I park my car and get out, leaning with my back against my trunk. Should I even bother going to class? No, right? I should go help Jonathan. Yeah. Jonathan and Joyce and Will are more important right now. I'd tell my mom, whether or not she'd let me go I'd still tell her.

Before I can back in my car, Barb and Nancy are rushing over to me. "How are you? How's Dustin?" Nancy asks, hands clutching some index cards.

"He's fine. All good. False alarm." I tell her, not mentioning the fact I

helped sneak a strange girl into her basement last night. Because again, I am capable of lying. Just not to my mom or brother. They only ever hear the truth.

"Oh, good."

"What's that?" I ask, pointing at the card. Nancy furrows her eyebrows while Barb bites her lip.

"You remembered the chem test, right?" Our ginger friend asks, and I blink owlshly.

"I'm so screwed. Shit, shit, shit!" I yell, scaring off a few students, getting the attention of the rest. I never scream when I'm around them.

"Woah, it's okay. We'll help you." Nancy pats my shoulder.

"I'm just going to skip. I'll call my mom, go help Jonathan."

"Will you relax, Smarties? I'm sure you know a few things." Barb tells me, giving me her most calming smile.

Her support is unfounded when I mix boiling point with melting point, and completely forget what an ion is because my mind isn't focusing. "Okay, okay. Just breathe. When alpha particles go through gold foil, they become..." I bite my lip and look up at Nancy as Barb reads from the card.

I follow her mouth as it moves silently. "Un...occupied space?" I finally get, both girls nodding at me, Nancy throwing me a wink.

"Good! Okay. A molecule that can -" Before she can finish asking me, Steve walks by and tugs the papers out of her hands, Tommy H. pushing between us and flicking the back of Barb's neck before I can slap at him.

"Aw, did the Ice Queen forget to study?" Steve teases.

I purse my lips. "Yeah, actually. Brilliant deduction."

"See, I would copy off of Nancy. She's got this. You, well, we're all

concerned." He mockingly tells me, and I narrow my eyes.

"I can figure it out without cheating, thanks. I'm not you, dumbass." He clutches at his heart.

"Wow, harsh. How's your little brother?"

"Are you asking because you care or because you want to make a smartass comment?" I ask, Barb nervously tapping at my elbow.

"Oh, relax, it was just small talk." He attempts to touch my nose in a condescending manner but I slap his hand away. Steve ignores it in favor of continuing whatever he's trying to bother us about. "Now, onto more important matters. My dad has left town on a conference and my mom's gone with him, 'cause, you know, she doesn't trust him."

"Good call." Tommy jokes, Steve smiling at him.

"So, are you in?"

"In for what?" Nancy asks. Oh, my sweet innocent flower. See, this is why we don't go for guys like Steve, Nancy.

"No parents? Big house?" Carol speaks up, leaning on the wall.

"A party?"

"Ding, ding, ding." The other redhead sarcastically quips at the Wheeler girl, and I roll my eyes.

"It's Tuesday."

"It's Tuesday'." Tommy mocks. "Oh my God." Steve slaps at his best friend while the freckled boy and his bitch girlfriend laugh, and I glare at them.

"Come on. It'll be lowkey. It'll just be us. What do you say? Are you in or are you out?"

"Um -" Before she can answer, Steve looks over our heads and frowns.

"Oh, God. Look." Carol speaks up, and we all turn around.

Jonathan is at the bulletin board, stapling up the missing fliers we made. My heart tightens.

"Oh, God, that's depressing." Steve adds, and I turn my head, smiling to myself when my blonde ponytail whacks Carol in the face.

"Yeah, well, his twelve-year-old brother is missing, you complete jackass." I look up at him, cold murder in my eyes. "Screw you."

"Should we say something?"

"I don't think he speaks." I turn my head to glare at Carol. "Well, he only speaks to his Freak Queen. Is he quiet when you're screwing, too?"

"How much do you want to bet he killed him?" Tommy quickly asks, and my hands start to shake so I clench them, nails biting into my palms.

"Shut up." Steve scoffs.

I glower at the three goons. "Listen to me, very carefully. If you say one more thing about Jonathan, if you even look his way or try to spread some shitty rumor, I'll show you what I can really do. I don't care if it lands me in jail. Do you understand me?"

And before they can respond I turn around, Nancy following me. "Jonathan." I gently murmur, pressing my hand on his shoulder. He jumps and looks down at me, eyes a little red.

"Oh. Ver. Nancy?" He asks, looking at the girl standing next to me.

"Hi."

"Hey." He replies, confused.

"I just... I wanted to say, you know, um... I'm sorry about everything." I watch as she turns her head and I do the same, Tommy raising his hand slowly in a half-hearted wave. "Everyone's thinking about you. It sucks."

Jonathan nods. "Yeah."

"I'm sure he's fine. He's a smart kid." The school bell rings, breaking the moment. "We have to go. Chemistry test." Nancy gestures to me, but I'm too busy staring up into Jonathan's eyes.

"Yeah."

"Good luck." She starts dragging me back to the group, and I stare after my best friend as he keeps stapling fliers.

I shake her off my arm when stop at the group and briefly look at her. "Get off me."

"C'mon. We have to take this test. It's worth, like, a bunch of points."

"A stupid chemistry test is not more important than helping my best friend!" I argue, ignoring the fact Steve and his two friends are listening in. "Besides, I didn't study, so I'd fail it anyway."

I turn my head and see Jonathan walking out, then jog after him. "Smarties, what are you doing?" Barb calls after me, and I briefly look back at her, stepping through the hole the students made for me.

"Cover for me! Say I have, like, my period or something!" I call back, indifference in my voice. "Like, a really bad one!" I add as I open the door and let it slam behind me.

Jonathan is walking to his car. "John!" I shout, and he stops to look at me, confused.

"Don't you have a test?"

"Screw the stupid test. I'm helping you."

"What about your mom? What are you going to tell her?"

"The truth. She's still home. We'll go drop off my car and then I'll go with you."

"I'm not going to be able to convince you otherwise, right."

I pat his shoulder. "Nope. C'mon, Byers."

He shakes his head as I brush past him to get in my car, and through my rearview mirror I watch his beat up vehicle following closely behind me, until he parks just outside the driveway to my house.

Sure enough, my mom is inside. Mews is on her lap, purring until he hisses in my direction. "Dumpling, what are you doing here?" She asks as I dump my backpack.

"I'm going to help Jonathan and Joyce."

"No. You're supposed to be in class!" She tells me. I only turn back around to open the door. "Veronica!"

"Mom, please. I won't be able to focus. You know I won't. I'm sorry, but I refuse to lie to you. Even if you drove me to school I'd sneak out. You know I would. You can ground me, take the keys to my car, I don't care. But I have to help them."

She sighs, still petting Mews. "Oh, alright. But you are on laundry duty for a month! And dish duty!"

I grin and rush over to kiss her cheek. "Thank you. I love you. Good luck with the search!"

Jonathan is waiting in his car when I jog over and slide over the hood, my best friend honking in fear.

"Jesus Christ, Ver. Slide on the hood of your own damn car! This one's fragile!"

"Sorry, sorry."

Jonathan rolls his eyes and pulls away from my house, driving into town. It's a silent ride for awhile, the Hawkins scenery passing us by as we continue on to Main Street. "Thank you. For doing this."

"Hey, you're my brother. I'm not gonna leave you on your own, not right now." I clutch his shoulder and he removes one hand from the wheel to pat it.



"You're awesome. You know that?" He asks, and I blush at the compliment. "Are you... are you blushing? God, you haven't done that in years. Not since Adam told you your hair looked nice in the sixth grade."

"Shut up." I bite at his teasing, but I feel a little lighter. "It's just hot in here."

"No, no. You're blushing. Do I not tell you you're awesome enough? Because I can start. Imagine how freaked out the school will be when they see you all bubbly."

"I'm not bubbly."

"You used to be."

"Yeah, well, things used to be different." I remind him, moving my hand.

After a few moments of silence, he finally responds. "I didn't think you would be, though."

"What does that mean?"

"It mean I miss who you used to be. I miss your laughter - your real, loud one, not the quiet shoulder shaking you do. And how optimistic you were, and how enthusiastic you were about life. It was refreshing. It always helped me."

"Jonathan -"

"Look, I know life is all about change and shit, but I miss you sometimes. The real you."

"This is who I am. And you should have thought of that before I committed to the personality flip." My tone is rough, though. Just... realistic, if that makes any sense.

"Yeah, I know."

"Look, when we get Will back, I'll start to try. Okay? At least with you."

He nods, and smiles at me. "Good. I mean, don't get me wrong, you're a total badass at school. I like not constantly being beat up."

I snort and roll my eyes. "Yeah, yeah. Me too."

We keep driving, the ride a little less tense. But it changes when "Should I Stay or Should I Go" begins to play on the radio.

This is their song, you know. Will and Jonathan's. They would put it on, whenever Lonnie and Joyce fought a little too loudly. On bad days I'd make sure to play it for Will, just to watch him bop his head and awkwardly dance around.

Of course, when we make a turn away from the center of town, I look over at Jonathan in surprise. "Where are we going?"

His hands clench tighter around the wheel. "Lonnie."

"I told my mom I was going to help you!"

"This is helping me." He argues. "Please? You know he's a dick, and I \_"

"Yeah, okay." I mutter. "Next time just tell me!"

"To be fair, this was a spur of the moment decision!" He yells as we pass the "Leaving Hawkins" sign.

I cross my arms and lean back. "Huh. I didn't know you were capable of that."

"Yeah, yeah. Shut up and change the channel."

"Do you even know where we're going?"

He nods. "Yeah. I kept the address in the car. Just in case I ever needed to give him a piece of my mind." Jonathan looks at me. "Now's a good a time as any. Hopefully Will's with him, and this nightmare can just stop."

---

*I'm sitting on a log, hair pulled up into high pigtails and camping clothes*

on. I watch my dad as he gets the fire going, and Jonathan and Lonnie return from their little excursion, the older man holding a shaking rabbit. "Jonathan, quit being a pussy! You're here to learn how to hunt!"

"What's the problem, Lonnie?" My dad asks, and I frown at the tears rolling down my best friend's face.

"Damn kid won't stop crying. I asked him to do the honors, and the water works started." Jonathan's dad gripes.

"Dad, I can't! Don't make me!"

Lonnie only holds out a hunting knife, a similar one to my dad's. "Act like a man. Stop crying! Robert brought his girl, and she had no problem joining in on the hunt!"

"I'm not Veronica!"

"No, you're not. You wanna grow up a pussy? Huh? Weak! No son of mine will be weak!"

"Mr. Byers, I can show him how to do it." I speak up, my voice small compared to the raging mad man in front of me. He looks down. "So he knows how to do it without hurting the rabbit."

"C'mon, Lonnie. Let my girl show your boy how it's done." My dad adds. That should have been a sign of who he truly is, but I was too young and naive to see it.

"Okay. Fine." Lonnie hands me the knife and forces the writhing rabbit into Jonathan's arms.

"Hey, it's going to be okay. We'll do it without hurting him, alright?" I tell my best friend, who nods and sniffs. "With a rabbit, you want to hold right here." I put my hand on the poor guy's head, remembering what my dad taught me. "Then you lift up, quickly." I snap its head up and break its neck, the rabbit going limp in our hold. Jonathan is still crying. "I'm sorry." I whisper, then hold up the knife. "I'll show you how to drain and skin it."

"Okay." Jonathan murmurs back.

*"See, nothing to it. Quit acting like a baby!" Lonnie yells.*

*I can't hold in my anger. I look up at the older man and glower. "Kids can cry."*

"Ver, you with me?" Jonathan asks, pulling me from a nearly 6-years-old memory.

"Sorry, I was just thinking."

"About what?" We make a turn, and I notice we're getting closer to the outskirts of Indianapolis.

"That time our dad's decided to go hunting together, with us."

"We were 10. And I cried when Lonnie tried to make me kill the rabbit."

"And I killed it for you."

"And you killed it for me." He smiles, despite the horror we both felt in that moment. "You told him off."

"I'm surprised he didn't come after me."

"And piss off his hunting buddy?" Jonathan scoffs. "Not a chance."

"Our dads suck."

Jonathan actually laughs, a loud boisterous one. "Yeah. Yeah, they really do." He straightens then, when we turn on a road surrounded by houses even more run down than his own. "We're close."

"We can turn around." I offer.

He shakes his head. "And miss the chance to call Lonnie a dick to his face? Hell no."

I smile proudly as he makes another turn, until we roll to a stop in front of a house between an empty factory and a construction site. Jonathan stops the car and we get out together, slamming the doors as we go, rain falling down on us on our way to the house.

Jonathan looks through the tiny diamond window in the door and pounds next to the glass. Inside, I can hear the TV playing music, so clearly someone's home. "Hello?" Jonathan calls.

A few seconds later a girl maybe a couple of years older than us opens the door, loudly chewing her gum. "Yeah?" She asks. "Can I help you?"

"Cynthia?" I ask, remembering the name Joyce yelled over the phone yesterday.

"Who wants to know?" She asks.

"Is Lonnie around?" Jonathan asks.

"Yeah, he's out back. What do you want?"

"To look around." My best friend answers, and we both push past her.

"Hey, what do you think you two are doing?"

"We'll be fast." Jonathan calls back, walking past the kitchen to where the rooms are. "Hey Will? Will!" He calls.

"Will, buddy, let's go!" I add to the mix, and we pound a closed door. It's locked, so we turn to look inside the open bedroom. Nothing.

Just as we're turning to walk back through the kitchen, a man rushes in and slams Jonathan into the wall. "Get off!" Jonathan shouts, pushing Lonnie Byers off of him. The man hasn't changed in a year. Well, actually, he's probably a bigger dick, but whatever.

"Damn, you've gotten stronger." Lonnie compliments, patting his oldest son's chest like it means something.

"Can someone please explain what the hell is going on?" Cynthia asks, coming into view.

"Jonathan, Cynthia. Cynthia, this is Jonathan, my oldest." Lonnie looks down at me, smirking. "And if it isn't little Veronica. You and my son finally dating?"

I wrinkle my nose. "Gross. No offence." I tell Jonathan, who's making the same face.

"Cynthia, this is Jonathan's best friend, Veronica." Lonnie formally introduces us, patting me on the shoulder before I can stop him. "Come here." He lets go of me to pull Jonathan into a hug, but my best friend pushes the asshole away, again.

"Get off me man!"

"What are you two doing here?"

"We're looking for Will. Your youngest." I say, biting my lip.

Lonnie nods. "C'mon out. I wanna show you something." We walk away from Cynthia and out the back door, where Jonathan's dad leads us to an Oldsmobile. "Take a look at this beaut. Should've seen it when I got it. Took me a year, but it's almost done." Jonathan ignores his dad in favor of walking around to the trunk and opening it, rifling through. "Really? You want to check up my ass, too?" Jonathan slams it close. "I'm telling you the same thing as I told those cops, he's not here and he never has been."

"Then why didn't you call mom back?" He asks, walking up to Lonnie.

"I don't know, I just... I just assumed she forgot where he was."

I glower at his back, frosty. "Kind of like how you keep forgetting to send your kids money? Take care of them? See them?" Lonnie turns around, eyes filling with rage. "Glad to see a damn car's more important than your sons."

"You sure he ain't lost? That boy never was very good at taking care of himself."

"This isn't some kind of joke, alright?" Jonathan asks, getting his dad's attention. "There are search parties, reporters..."

"Hopper's not still Chief, is he?" Silence. "Tell your mother she's gotta get you out of that hellhole. Come out here to the city. People are more real here, you know?"

"Yeah. They're real dicks." I mutter to myself, unheard over the construction.

"And then I could see you more." Jonathan shakes his head. "What, you don't think I want to see you?"

"I know you don't."

"See, that's your mother talkin' right there. She even know you're here?" Lonnie turns around. "Does yours?"

"Yes." I *lie*, because screw this dude.

Lonnie just sighs. "Well, that's great. One kid goes missing, the other one runs wild?" He asks Jonathan. "Some real fine parenting right there. Look, all I'm saying is, maybe I'm not the asshole, alright?"

I shake my head and Jonathan scoffs. He walks towards me, but presses the missing flyer in his father's chest. "In case you forgot what he looks like. Let's go, Ver."

I nod and follow my best friend, sending Lonnie one last scathing look before walking away.

Shithead.

---

Jonathan drops me off with a promise to call me tomorrow. I kiss his cheek in a platonic way and get out, walking up to my house and opening the door. I'm greeted to the sight of my mom cooking dinner. "Oh, good, you're home!"

"Yeah, sorry. It took longer than I thought."

"But you helped them?" She asks.

I nod, and swallow down the gross feeling in my stomach at the thought of lying, or even omitting the truth. "Yeah. I hope I did. Jonathan's going to call tomorrow. Are you going back out?"

"No, no." She shakes her head. "I'm a little tired." I nod and pull her into a hug. "Oh, that's nice."

"Love you, mom."

"I love you, too. Have you spoken to your brother?"

"Not yet, no."

"You two never fight. What's going on?"

I shrug. "A little misunderstanding. But I'll talk to him, tomorrow."

"Good, good. Oh, Nancy Wheeler called. She asked if you could meet up with her and Barb to study tonight? She said you have a chemistry test soon, and I told them they could come get you around 8:30. Is that okay?"

I shrug. Typical of Nancy. "Well, she's stubborn. You know she and Barb won't take no for an answer."

"Excellent. I just want you to do well, hon. Will you be coming home or spending the night with Nancy?"

I shrug. "Not sure. I'll pack some clothes, just in case."

"Okay! I'm sure they'll be here soon."

I nod and go to my room, smiling when I see my bag resting on my bed with a bar of nougat next to it. Dustin.

I grab an extra bag and shove in any clothes I might need, then I'm back in the living room, nougat in my pocket and a bag on each shoulder. Right on time, too, because someone knocks on the door. My mom answers it, and Barb's taller frame towers over her. She beckons me over and I hug my two close girl friends, promising to call my mom the next day. A hug and kiss later we're in Barb's car, driving away. But when I realize we're headed to Loch Nora, the ritzy neighborhood, I groan in realization.

"Shit, we aren't. Please tell me we aren't going to Harrington's stupid party."

"C'mon, Vera. Don't leave me alone with Tommy H and Carol."



"Barb's here."

"Yeah, and Barb doesn't want to be alone with them, either." The redhead gripes in the third person.

I narrow my eyes at Nancy. "I can't believe you lied to my mom, Nance. You know how I feel about that."

"I'm sorry!" She apologizes. "But I really did bring my flashcards, so you can study."

"You want me to study. At a party." I blink.

"It's study or talk to Harrington's pals." Barb reminds me, voice gruff and clearly pissed at Nancy.

"You know, studying sounds fun." I murmur, leaning back.

When we come to a row of, well, mansions, Nancy asks Barb to pull over. "What are we doing here?" The ginger asks. "His house is three blocks away."

"We can't park in the driveway."

"Are you serious?"

"Can't believe I've been lied to twice today." I grumble, and Nancy sets down her lipstick for a few seconds.

"What does that mean? Where did you go."

"Indianapolis."

"Indianapolis?"

"Did I stutter?" I ask, arms crossed but tone not nearly as harsh as I want it to be.

Nancy just sighs and turns to Barb. "We're parking here so his neighbors don't see."

"This is so stupid. I'm just gonna drop you off and then me and Smarties are going to study."

"Oh, thank God."

Nancy shakes her head. "Calm down, Barb. Come on. You promised that you'd go. You're coming."

I lean forward. "Yeah, well, I made no such promise."

"But you're not gonna leave me alone. What if Tommy does something or this ends up being a trick? Who's going to protect me?" Nancy guilts me, and I purse my lips.

"You know, I liked it better when we weren't friends and I could push everyone away."

Nancy smiles. "I know. Come on." She reaches into her pocket and pulls out the stack of index cards. "Study."

"You got it, dude." I murmur.

Barb still isn't sold, though. "Nance, he just wants to get in your pants." I gesture my hand to her in agreement, but I'm ignored.

"No, he doesn't."

"Nance, seriously." Our friend finally looks at the ginger, innocence fading away. "He invited you to his house. His parents aren't home. C'mon, you are not this stupid."

"Tommy H. and Carol are there."

"Tommy and Carol have been having sex, since, like, seventh grade." Barb points out, and I wrinkle my nose and move my head back in disgust. Because yeah, it's obvious, but no one wants the image of that rolling around in their brain. "It'll probably be just, like, a big orgy."

"Hard pass."

"Right?" We high-five.

"Gross." Nancy groans.

"I'm serious!"

"Alright, well... you two can be my guardians. Make sure I don't get drunk and do anything stupid." Barb and I watch as Nancy takes off her sweater and shirt to change her top, and Barb makes a face.

"Is that a new bra?"

"No!" Nancy attempts to lie, but we give her identical looks of disbelief. She simply rolls her blue eyes and tugs on her red and white striped top, covering it with her blue wool coat.

We all get out and make the walk to Steve's house, and I occasionally scruff up the white toes of my converse, a little irritated I didn't change beforehand. Not because I want to impress anyone, but because I can still feel Lonnie and Indianapolis all over me.

We walk up the driveway to the big red door and Nancy timidly knocks. It's too quiet, though, and I'm irritated, so I bang on it a few times. "What?" I ask.

"Chill."

"I am chill, Nance. I'm the Queen of Chill."

"So act like it. Study." I grumble under my breath but do as she says, Barbara letting out a small laugh. Seconds later the door is pulled open, and I look up to see Steve standing with a hand on his hips, smirk on.

"Hello, ladies." Then he looks between the two taller girls, warm brown eyes zeroing in on me. "Well, if it isn't the Ice Queen of Hawkins. Tired of your lonely ice castle?" He tries to bait me.

So I put on my innocent smile, the one I use before a verbal match. To my delight he straightens a bit, backing up. "Glass houses, Harrington." I gesture to his mansion, then smirk up at him, mockingly repeating Carol's earlier words. "No parents. Big house?"

His eyes darken a bit, but he chooses not to comment further. Instead, his billion-dollar smile appears.

"Well, come on in. Party's out back."

Nancy throws me a warning look as we follow him through the house, but I only narrow my eyes. He started it, I want to scream. He always starts it.

Tommy H. and Carol are standing by the pool, looking too cool for school. They wave at us in their usual "we're better than you" way, and of course Carol just has to say something to me when I sit at the only other pool chair available - unfortunately next to Steve - and immediately flip through the study cards.

"How was playing hookie with the freak, Veronica?" She asks, batting her eyelashes. "Did you manage to look for him in between a few quickies?" I roll my eyes and pay no attention to her. *Ions are atoms... molecules... whatever that have a net electric charge thanks to gaining or losing electrons. Cool. Awesome. One step closer to not failing Kaminsky's stupid test.* "What, he screw you so hard you can't hear? Hello?"

"If you don't shut up I'll force these cards down your throat and watch you choke on them." I sing out. "It may actual improve your voice. When you talk, it sounds like nails scratching down chalkboard. Did you know that?" I look up and fold my legs under me, chewing my lip in thought. "No? Well, now you do."

I go back to my studying, smiling when Carol huffs out, "Whatever."

*In a molecule of CH<sub>4</sub>, the hydrogen atoms are spatially oriented towards the centers of... tetrahedrons.*

I'm shaken from my studying by Carol's screams, only to look up and see Tommy attempting to throw her in the pool, laughing hysterically. Modern English's "I Melt With You" plays on the boombox as Steve walks back to us, stabbing a pocket knife into his can of beer, opening the top, and chugging. He sets the can on the table between us and obnoxiously sits in his chair, making sure to make as much noise as possible. He puts a cig between his plump red lips and lights the end, and it has me itching to ask for one.

Surprisingly, he looks my way. Taking in my focus on the cig he opens his pack and offers me one. "Come on, princess. Your brother isn't here to suffer the effects of secondhand smoke. It's why you stopped, right? Only I know you miss it." He's pretty much

whispering, now, unheard by the rest of the party.

I tilt my head in confusion. "How did you -"

"Just take it. Before I rescind the offer."

I shrug, letting his tone slide in favor of taking a cig and setting it between my lips, our fingers touching as he passes me the lighter. I ignore the fluttering in my stomach to focus on the flame and give the zippo back, nodding in thanks.

"You're smoking again?" Barb asks, disappointment on her face.

"It's been a long day."

"Too much screwing?" Tommy H. asks, and I take a drag before leaning back, moving my legs down to cross my ankles, one arm over my head and cards in my coat pocket.

"Tommy, buddy, I just had to deal with an asshole who makes you look like a damn angel. Let's take it easy on the screwing comments, before I make it so you can't screw."

He holds up his hands in surrender. "Fine, okay. Tonight only, though. Tomorrow we'll return to our regular smackdown."

"Can't wait. It's my favorite pastime." I wink at Carol, who rolls her eyes and crosses her arms.

"That's the spirit. Look at us, all getting along." Steve grins, then shotguns another beer. When he's done, he takes another drag from his cig.

"Is that supposed to impress me?" Nancy asks, flirtatious smile gracing her features.

"You're not?"

She smirks. "You are a cliché, you do realize that?"

"You are a cliché, what with your... your grades and your band practice."

"I'm not in band."

"She's not in band." Nancy and I both respond, sending each other a small grin.

"Okay, party girl. Why don't you just, uh, show us how it's done, then?" Steve asks, handing her the knife and an empty can of beer.

She takes it and stands, looking at me nervously, but I only give her a discreet nod. With a shrug she stabs it, opens it, and places her mouth on the small tear.

"Chug, chug, chug, chug, chug, chug... yes!" Steve and his friends cheer as she guzzles it down, but Barb only looks disappointed. Still, I'm proud of Nancy for at least attempting to break out of her comfort zone, so I give her a quiet clap.

"Nicely done. Very impressive." Steve commends her, and she blushes, brushing her hair behind her ears.

"Thanks. I, uh, had a great teacher."

Three heads turn to look at me in unison, and I raise an eyebrow. "What?"

"Listen, I've never seen you at a party. How would you know?" Carol asks, but the look on her face isn't as cruel as usual. So I shrug.

"What can I say, I'm just full of surprises."

"Well, come on." Tommy tells me, handing me a can. I hold up my hand and Nancy tosses the thankfully closed knife at me. I catch it with ease and flip it open, still leaning back as I quickly stab through the metal. A clink of metal later my mouth is pressed around the tiny slit, the cool beer spilling down my throat as I chug, emptying the can as quickly as Steve.

"Damn!" Carol claps. "And here I thought all you were good for was scaring off people."

"I'm multi talented." I respond, setting down the can and handing the knife to Steve before I continue to smoke.

"Barb, you want to try?" Nancy asks, attempting to bring our redheaded friend into the now.

"What? No. No, I don't want to, thanks."

"Come on."

"Nancy, she doesn't have to -" But Nancy doesn't listen to me, high off the attention. She takes the knife from Steve and hands Barb a can of beer.

"It's fun, just give it a -"

"Nance -"

"Just, give it a shot."

With great reluctance, Barb listens, only to miss the can and slice her hand. She caves in on herself in pain while Tommy lets out an unhelpful, "Gnarly."

"Barb, you're bleeding -"

Nice, Nancy. Real helpful. "I'm fine. Where's your bathroom?" She asks Steve, who gets up.

"Oh, it's uh... down past the kitchen, to the left."

"Thanks." She mumbles, walking away. I stand and flick my cig away, breezing past Steve only for Nancy to tug at my hand.

"Whoa, where are you going?" She asks me.

I glare at her, the air feeling like it's freezing around me. "Don't touch me." She lets go, shocked at how harsh I sound. "I'm going to help my friend. Have fun out here."

"Veronica!"

"Let her go, c'mon. You know how she is." Tommy tells Nancy as I walk away, into the Harrington house and towards the bathroom.

Barb is running her hand under the faucet, wincing as the blood leaks

down and briefly stains the white porcelain. "Damn it."

"Hey, it's okay. I'll help."

"Thanks." She gives me a shy smile and I give her a kind nod, rifling through the cabinets until I find rubbing alcohol, a bandaid, and some paper towels. "Hey, are you okay?"

"You're the one bleeding, and you're asking me how I'm doing?"

She shrugs, flinching when I dab at her hand with the hydrogen peroxide. "You just look angry."

"Yeah, well, Nancy pissed me off."

"She's just really into Steve."

"Still sucks."

"Yeah." Nancy looks me over. "Especially since she can't see how much you like him."

And whoomp, there it is. Someone's noticed, which means other people probably have to.

"I don't know what you're talking about." I murmur, gently holding down on the wound to stop the blood.

"Veronica. You know my glasses actually help me see, right?"

"Yeah, yeah. You're the damn Wizard of Oz."

"Smarties, come on. Don't shut me out. Please stop shutting us out. What will it take for you to have some trust?"

I look up at her. "When people prove they won't leave me."

"People always leave, Veronica. But you know what we do about it? We keep moving on. We prove to the world we're more than just the forgotten. Okay?"

"This is who I am, Barb. It's the only thing keeping me safe." I admit. "I'd rather be cold and keep people away, then let them and wait for



them to go."

"You let me in."

"Yeah, but you're stubborn." I point out, removing the paper towel and tossing the bloodied thing away in favor of covering the wound with a bandaid.

A few moments pass while we stand in the bathroom, then Barb speaks up once more. "For what it's worth, I think he's interested, too."

"Barb, no. I appreciate you trying, but he likes Nancy. And I'm okay with it, really. I don't have any right to feel hurt, or jealous, because there's no way a guy like Steve Harrington would ever find me appealing."

"Stop it, Veronica. That's your insecurity talking, not you. Okay?"

I sniff and throw my arms around her. "You're so smart. Seriously. I'm lucky to be your friend."

"Yeah. I'm lucky to be yours, too." We break apart. "We should go see what Nancy's up to. Make sure she's okay."

I huff. "Fine. But you owe me a strawberry milkshake for this."

"Cross my heart, Smarties." We walk out of the bathroom, only to hear people walking up the stairs. Barb rushes ahead of me, and we stare up at Nancy as she stands on the steps, wrapped in a towel.

"Nancy. Where are you going?"

"Nowhere. Just... upstairs. To change. I... fell in the pool."

I make a noise, raising my eyebrows and looking away. "Right."

Nancy nods, then looks at us in concern. "Why don't you both go ahead and go home. I'll just... I'll get a ride, or something."

"Are you kidding me?" I ask.

"Nance."

"Barb... I'm fine."

Barb shakes her head. "This isn't you."

"I'm fine. Just, go ahead and go home, okay?" With one last sad look she squelches upstairs, leaving Barb and I to scoff.

"Was I like this when I was with a guy?" I finally ask her.

Barb shakes her head, wrinkling her nose. "Nope. You had taste."

I snort, but my eyes are a bit teary. I know what happens when you go upstairs with the guy you like, in a big empty house. I've been there. And I know I'm a hypocrite, because I lost my virginity to another guy - which I still don't regret - but still. This is Steve. And there's no way I could ever be with him now. There are rules us girls follow, you know. Unspoken, but they're still there.

Rule number one, don't get with the guy your friend used to be with, no matter how short the relationship.

"Hey, why don't we sit outside for a bit? By the pool. Wait and see if Nance changes her mind."

I sigh but nod in agreement, letting Barb pull me with her. We both climb onto the diving board and sit with our backs to each other, my head resting on her shoulder. "This just blows." I bemoan. "Like, what was the point of making us come if she was just going to ditch us? She made me suffer through a conversation with Tommy and Carol! See, now I'm just mad because of that." I gripe, arms crossed.

"Yeah, I know. I'm sorry, by the way. I know you actually were hoping to study."

"I hate studying."

"You can't fool me, Smarties. I see who you really are."

I smile. "Yeah. Yeah, I suppose you do." I hear a little rip and turn my body, realizing she's pulled back the bandaid to check on her cut. It's still bleeding, a few red drops landing in the pool. "Barb, you were supposed to keep that covered."

"Yeah, yeah, I know, I was just -"

Growling cuts us off, and I look up to see this great big beast looming over us, face opening like some sort of lethal flower. It reaches over me and grabs Barb, pulling her up. She shrieks and I yelp, but manage to wrap my arms around her ankle. We're tugged away, and the world goes black.

### 3. We're Not in Hawkins Anymore

Hi all, and welcome to my *Stranger Things* Steve Harrington/OC story! It's been a long, long time coming. Seriously. Since 2017 long.

I just updated the first chapter, so this is a little different than the original I posted. In this story, we've got the Ice Queen of Hawkins, the older-but-shorter-by-season 2 sister of Dustin Henderson, because he deserves an older sibling. She's Veronica, and even though Heathers came out in 1989 I've taken the liberty of borrowing some of my favorite quotes because Winona Ryder Easter Eggs. Seriously, I cannot overstate my love for that movie. Anyway, there's more of a backstory for the Henderson family, including adding the dad to the "asshole fathers club", co-president with Lonnie Byers, the prick. Expect explicit language because, hello, *Stranger Things* isn't known for censoring language.

Fair warning, while this is Steve/OC the season 2 part will include Billy/OC, but not for long. I promise. He's a great villain, but he's a dick until he isn't. Just wanted to get that out of the way. Because again, he's a dick. But I'm also treating their relationship a bit like Jackson Whittemore and Lydia Martin's from *Teen Wolf*, especially with the later outcome. And there will also be inbetween chapters between ST 1 and ST 2, then ST 2 and ST 3, adding some more things as well as a deeper dive into how Max and Billy's relationship changes, because let's be honest that wasn't really commented on in ST 3, and I'd like to see it. But this will not be a Billy Hargrove/OC endgame story. Not like that.

As Veronica was last seen being dragged to the Upside Down, she's not around for the events of 1x03-1x04. This chapter has elements of 1x05 towards the end, but we pick up again with canon at 1x06 - next chapter, which will hopefully be updated tomorrow or the day after. In this update we see Veronica navigating the Upside Down, and basically deal with her inner thoughts. As she has been written to have depression and

anxiety, we also see the tail end of what happens if someone is abducted, left on their own, and has to navigate a strange place in order to survive, and they haven't taken their medicine. And don't have actual food. Or water. So warning, it will get dark. There are thoughts of suicide, though not through graphic means in anyway. It's more about succumbing to that loss of hope and the fact it's been a few days so she'll "die anyway." And though it's a shorter chapter, there will be flashbacks and nightmares all about this adventure, so we'll see more of her in the Upside Down as *The Ice Queen of Hawkins* progresses.

Enjoy the story! I only own Veronica.

---

I start to open my eyes, vision blurry. The world is still dark, the floor is stick, and the air is hot and heavy and my ears ringing. So it's no surprise that my first thought is, "Oh, great, I blacked out at a party."

It isn't until I start to sit up that everything starts to come back to me. Jonathan and I drove to Indianapolis, and we missed the vigil for Will. Barb and Nancy picked me up. We went to Steve's for a party. Barb cut her hand. Nancy went upstairs. We sat at the pool. Then something... took us?

My ears are ringing and I press down on each one, rocking back and forth in pain. A blurry form comes in front of me, red hair matted with slime and clothes covered in goo. Barb. "-ica. On. Ver. Veronica!" My ears are still ringing but my name comes out, loud and clear. She has her hands on my shoulders, shaking me. "C'mon!"

"Where -"

"We have to go!" Barb helps me stand, and I groan in pain, stumbling, my left ankle on fire. "Nancy!" She shouts, looking around, and my vision becomes more clear.

We're standing inside a pool. An empty pool. Covered in vines, with ash in the air. "Co-cover. Cover y-your mouth." I stutter, pulling up my shirt collar up to cover my mouth and nose.

Barb ignores me though, holding me up with one arm as she yells,

"Nancy! Nancy!"

The only answer she receives is a growl, and we both turn to see this great, terrible monster in the corner of the pool. It roars, face opening like a flower.

It's the creature that took us.

I'm too sore, too tired to scream. Barb does, though. Louder than I ever thought possible, and she rushes me to the side of the pool to latch onto the vines. "Climb! Get out of here!"

"Barb!" I shout, but she rushes away, the monster slowly approaching us, its movements calculated.

"VERONICA, CLIMB!" She screams, and I nod.

My ankle is injured, but my arms are still strong thanks to archery. The vines are sticky, too, which helps. I try to hold my breath as my collar slips down from my face. The adrenaline keeps me from succumbing to exhaustion, and I carefully pull myself up and out of the pool, crawling to the stairs where a screaming Barb is making her way up.

"Barbara! Barbara! Take my hands!" I shout, shooting my body forward so it's between the metal bars of the pool ladder.

"Smarties!" She shouts, tears falling down her face. My own cheeks are wet, my eyes puffy.

"Take my hands!" I shout again, and our fingers become entangled, tighter than the vines I just climbed up. Suddenly she screams in pain, thrashing. "Barb!"

"Go! Smarties, go!"

"No, I'm not leaving you!" I scream back, holding on tighter.

She shakes her head, face twisted in pain. "Veronica, go! Get out of here! Go!"

We both scream as she pulled away from me and I scramble forward

to reach her. "NO! NO!" The world closes in on me, tighter as the monster disappears into the dark, empty pool, Barbara with him.

Something else growls, though, in the distance. But I don't care. I need to get to Barb. I have to get to Barb.

The growling gets closer, and I roll over just in time to see this wolf-like creature jumping over me, snarling in warning.

And my adrenaline snaps back in. The age old "fight or flight" dilemma takes over and I stand up, backing away and screaming when my ankle snaps a bit.

"Get away from me!" I yell at the creature, but it only snarls and runs towards me.

So I make my decision. Ankle be damned, I run into the woods, staggering as I go and covering my mouth and nose with my arm.

Something growls, and I force myself to continue running away. It feels like I'm stepping on a bunch of snakes, and my ankle is constantly getting tangled up or catching onto a knot, but I can't see a lot even with the lit fog surrounding me.

"Please let this be a bad dream. Please let this be a bad dream." I pray out loud as I run through the woods I thought I knew, but when I pinch my skin nothing happens.

I keep to the edge of the forest, close to where I can easily escape.

As I move as silently as possible through the ashy forest, my mind slips back to the past. The good past.

*"Okay, kid. Let's say you go camping alone. You get lost on the way to the site you know, and end up in a completely different location. What do you do?" My dad asks.*

*"Don't panic." I tell him, twelve-year old me tugging a pigtail nervously.*

*He smiles, proud. "Good, good. Okay. Next?"*

*Try... try to retrace your steps."*

*"Yeah. And if you can't?"*

*"Stay put?"*

*He shakes his head. "Only if you've told someone where you're going. Let's say you don't. What do you do?"*

*"Stop... think... observe. Plan?"*

*"Ding, ding, ding, we have a winner." He smiles and pats my shoulder. But then the smile falls, a serious look back on his face. "Let's say you're injured. What do you do?"*

*"First aid, as soon as you can." I bite my lip. "Why do I need to know this, dad? You're always going to be with me."*

*"Always." He promises, one last lie before the truth comes out. "But you never know what's going to happen, Veronica. So I need you to be prepared for anything. What else do you have to do?"*

I blink and look around, mind no longer focusing on the bright sunny day my dad and I spent in the woods, a week before mom and I caught his ass. Find shelter. I look around, and it's as though he's next to me, not miles and a whole world away. *Someplace to stay warm and dry. Get water, and purify it. Make a fire. Ration your food. Be on the alert.*

I can remain vigilant, but the rest? I don't even know where I am. There are only two things I'm sure about as I creep through the woods. One, this place looks like my home, but it's not. And two, this isn't a dream, this is real. I'm on my own, Barb was taken, and I have to find her. But the only way I can do that is if I survive whatever the hell those *things* are and fix my damn ankle.

Finally, I reach what used to be a stream, only it's dried out. The coolness comes from the goo. It's surrounded by trees, and I sit down at the base of the largest trunk, pulling off my dirty, ripped varsity jacket as well as the flannel top covering my tee.

The button-down is ripped, so I dig my fingers into the tears and pull at the seams, continuing to rip until I have a bunch of makeshift bandages and a large square.



The first thing I do is take that large square and fold it like a bandana, tying it around my nose and mouth and double knotting it underneath my ruined ponytail. Then I roll up my jeans and carefully untie my converse, slipping it off my left shoe and pulling down my green-stained sock. My ankle is covered in bruises, and I bite my lip to hold in my groan as I press at it. There's no way for me to diagnose my injury, though. I can only hope it's just a bad sprain. So I tie the ends of the strips together and wrap my ankle slowly, making sure it's fully supported before I put my shoe back on. It's still throbbing, but the pain has gone down.

As I'm standing, jacket wrapped around my waist, something slithers over my hand. I turn my head and watch with wide eyes as a vine starts to wrap around me, getting tighter. More creep up, attempting to grab me.

But I won't let them take me. I have someone I need to save.

So I hold in my scream and tug back, uncaring about the rawness on my wrist as I run as fast as I can away from whatever the hell was trying to grab me.

Only the vines are more alive now, snaking up on my legs as I run and tug, ankle still supported because I'm overcompensating with my right.

Finally I'm practically crawling until I've reached an area of the woods not completely covered in vines, my lungs on fire. I'm in shape, yeah, but this is different.

Suddenly, the events of the night catch up with me, as if my brain is telling me it's time to succumb to the anxiety that kept inflating inside of me ever since I woke up in the pool. As if my body was bidding it's time before the balloon popped. The next thing I know, my back is pressed against the tree and I'm cover my eyes with my hands. A sudden sob wracks through my body, until more hiccup out of me.

Whatever lives here, those creatures - they don't seem to hear me. Or care. I mean, they should be swarming me, right? I'm on their turf, I'm the one that got away. They should be coming after me.

Why the hell am I complaining about being safe?

My chest gets even tighter than before, and I feel everything narrowing, my vision getting dark on the edges. Vaguely, I can feel my whole body shaking.

I haven't had a panic attack in years. Well, minor ones, but nothing a few deep breaths and therapy couldn't take care of. But this one takes the cake. Nothing I'm doing is working. I try to think of a happy memory, but all my mind can focus on is the fact I'm stuck down here.

God, it took me finally getting my wish of being left alone to see how stupid I've been.

"Stupid, stupid, stupid." I sob, and my heart feels like it's about to leave my body.

How could I have wished for this, ever? My mom's going to lose a daughter, my brother is going to lose a sister. Jonathan is going to lose a best friend. Nancy will be left with only Tommy and Carol.

I'm leaving them. I'm leaving them right now, being here. I'm gone.

Another shiver goes up my spine and my vision gets more hazy. Blacker. My breathing is completely erratic, and I can actually hear the blood pumping through my veins.

"Happy thoughts." I mutter. "H-happy. Thoughts."

I shift back and forth, covering my ears now to block out any sound. Think. Come on, please, please. Think.

"Leia." A familiar voice greets. I look around, startled. No one is there. "Leia." The voice repeats, closer. "Leia! Wait!" I blink and something tells me to look down. I stare down, a little boy with curly hair waddling up to me, dressed in a fuzzy bear-like costume, a strap running diagonally from his chest to his hip, completely oblivious to the world around him. "You promised!"

I get down on my knees to look directly at the boy, but his face is all blurry. Unfocused. I take his fuzzy gloved hands in mine. "What did I

promise?" I ask, completely confused. "How did you get here?"

"You said you'd stay with me! No friends, just me! You promised." The little boy with the blurry hair stomps his foot, ignoring my last question in favor of my first. "You lied."

"I didn't lie. I didn't lie!"

"Then why are you leaving?"

"I'm not! I don't understand! What are you doing here?"

"Jonathan isn't your brother! I am! You said you'd stay with me! No party!"

I gasp. "Dustin?"

The boy's face becomes clearer, until I completely I'm talking to my little brother when he was six. A *New Hope* had come out that May. I was finally allowed to take Dustin Trick-or-Treating on my own that Halloween, and the nerd was obsessed with Star Wars. He even started calling me Leia, after he heard my mother say my middle name, "Leigh." We worked together, my mom and I, to make the perfect little Chewbacca costume for him. And with me dressed in a white long-sleeved dress and the twin donut-hair, we were the Princess and the Walking Carpet.

"Don't go to the party!" Dustin begs, lisp even worse as his teeth were barely there those days.

"What party?" I bite my lip, thinking back to Halloween of '77. I was 10. Jonathan and I had been invited over to Ally Stuart's house. I remember because I forced Jonathan to get a Luke costume. He just didn't seem the "Han Solo" type. He still isn't.

I had also promised Dustin I would stay with him all night. He threw a fit, when I said I was leaving after dropping him off at home. His bucket was filled to the brim with candy, and I remember half of it falling out when he threw it down and cried.

I can see the tears now, again, and while my chest should be ripped open at this point, it starts to... fade? That tight feeling. It's fading.

I repeat the words I'd said that night, a personal promise I have done my best to stick to. "I love you, Dustin. You are my little brother. I carry you right here, just like you carry me. And I won't ever leave you. I promise."

Something snaps inside me. I realize that I had closed my eyes when I hallucinated my brother, because once they're open it's like I'm seeing everything at its highest setting. The world around me is practically glowing as I start to stand, steadying myself on the trees around me. My breathing is still heavy, my body still shaking with panic, but all that's on my mind is Dustin.

Dazedly I think out loud, "If only Hawkins High could see me now. Their Ice Queen - the one they parted the halls for - *afraid. Vulnerable.*"

I start to move, though. Through the dark forest, stepping as carefully as I can over vines, until I'm forced to stop, again. But this time for a completely different reason. Even though I'm at the edge of the woods, close to town, I have to stop.

Because I am oh so very hungry.

Uncaring of the vines at the moment, I fall to my knees, landing on the gooey soil. I breathe in under the hot flannel, hands landing on my thighs. I jolt when my left touches a mushy bulge in the pocket of my jeans. I nearly scream, expecting some kind of injury or thing. But a smile fills my face when I hear a crinkling wrapper and pull out a mushy but still real Three Musketeers bar, and look up at the sky.

"Thanks, Dustin." I whisper.

*Dustin. My mom. My friends. The little girl we found. Will. Barb.*

I have people counting on me, and I can't let them down.

So I take a bite, just one, and fold the wrapper down, tucking the bar into my pocket once more and standing up, shaky but a little stronger. More motivated.

First, I have to find Barb. I have to. Maybe... Maybe she was dragged out here, to the woods? Through a tunnel, or something? Predators

always have lairs. Parallel universes or wherever the hell I am would follow that rule, right?

Caves. I should check in caves.

I take in a deep breath, then breathe out.

It's time for me to be the Huntress. For however long I can be.

---

I groan, climbing up another rock with help from the vines. I guess I smell bad even to whatever dragged my ass here, because nothing's attacked me in hours. Days? It's hard to tell, really. Because the sun doesn't rise or set here, even when my eyes close for however long they can. The lack of medicine in my body has made my anxiety and depression peak, but then again that could be because I'm in an alternate dimension. I'm not in Hawkins anymore, even if the woods seem familiar. I spend too much of my time running and hiding from monsters. A couple had come close to getting me, only I know how to navigate a forest, even if it's stranger than most. I climb trees, I work against the vines. But in the end, it's no use, and I'm stuck with the knowledge that I failed *her*.

My hunt for Barb has gone slow. Too slow. And with every step I take, the fear builds in my veins, until I come to this horrible conclusion that I'm too late. I lost her. And if I survive, I'll have to tell her parents that I failed to keep their daughter safe.

The dark thoughts take over my mind and I find myself lying down on the cool rock, staring up at the starless, foggy sky. I could just lay here. Finish my candy. Wait to just die from exhaustion, dehydration. I know I'm dehydrated. My lips are cracked, my skin feels too tight, and I've stopped sweating even though I'm constantly moving. I'm running on hope, but my battery is dying and I don't think I'll get a recharge. A human can only go a week without water, longer without food. I can already feel myself getting close to death's door. It's a scary feeling, knowing you're going to die and that no one will find you. Maybe a monster will come by and eat you, ignoring the smell in favor of a meal.

I reach into my pocket, only to feel the wrapper. No more nougat.

The last gift I ever got, the last physical reminder of my little brother, and it's gone.

I gently move out of my jacket, having put it on... whenever ago. A thought crosses my mind when my hand reaches into one of the pockets and pulls out Nancy's index cards. I could just eat that, right? It's not like I'm going to live, anyway.

My mom and brother are going to be crushed. Do they even think I'm missing, though? Do they just assume I've decided to devote all my time to helping the Byers family? Is Will okay? Have they found him? What happened with that little girl we found in the woods?

I have so many questions, and no one to answer them.

Then my mind drifts further down the rabbit hole. Is Nancy happy? Is Steve making sure she's smiling? Is he taking care of her, like I wish he would take care of me?

Bet his friends would love seeing me like this, finally dethroned. Powerless. I can only imagine him caring about whether or not I'm okay. I don't actually believe he is. The only time he pays attention to me is when we're arguing. It's why I would keep them going, you know. Entertain him. Because even if it was for only a handful of minutes during the day, at least he noticed me. "King Steve and the Ice Queen." Now that could have been a good story. If only things were different.

I curl up into a ball and close my eyes, uncaring of vines that could squeeze me. I don't care anymore, and I don't care that I don't care. It feels good, letting go of all my feelings. My stupid, insignificant feelings. All I know is I let them win, over and over again. I pushed people away and missed out on so much. I'm going to die how I told myself I wanted to live - alone.

And you know what? That doesn't matter. Because my death won't make people stop living. They'll move on, even mom and my brother. They'll miss me, but eventually they'll let go. I know that should make me sad, but it's taking so much energy just to feel something right now.

I just want it all to be over. I want it all to end. I just want to leave.

I start to feel my breaths evening out, the world gets even more quiet. I can go, now. I can rest.

That's when I hear it, though. The thing that kicks me swiftly in the ass, jolting me out of depression and distracting me with confusion. An all-too familiar voice, sounding miles away but still so close. "Nancy! Nancy, where are you?"

"Jonathan! Jonathan!" A shrill scream responds, closer. So close.

"N-na." My voice cracks from disuse. "Na...na. Jo. Nath. Nan. Jona." I cough and sit up, slowly, energy wavering. I cough, clear my throat, anything to get it working again. "Nan. Cy. Jo. Athan. Nancy! Jonathan!" I finally scream, voice hoarse but suddenly strong. I scramble to the edge of the boulder only to drop and land on the vines, my right side taking the weight and my head miraculously not slamming on the ground. Something is snarling nearby, something else running, until a shadow looms over me, and my head rolls up, accepting my fate.

Only a flower-headed beast isn't standing over me, ready to attack.

It's Nancy.

## 4. The Monster

Hi all, and welcome to my *Stranger Things* Steve Harrington/OC story! It's been a long, long time coming. Seriously. Since 2017 long.

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This chapter takes place during 1x06, starting right where we left off - Nancy stumbling upon an injured, dehydrated, malnourished Ice Queen. Warning for asshole!Steve, teen angst, the usual. Veronica will start to suffer from PTSD and have more hallucinations, too, sharing some unseen memories of the Upside Down in her inner thoughts. Also, Veronica meets a bad man and does what us viewers wish we could. The next chapter



should be up soon, but when I'm finished with the first season I'll be taking a quick break to work on my other stories. I'm having a lot of fun writing this, though, and I have so many ideas. And while I usually hate slowburns because I'm impatient, I'm having a blast exploring Steve and Veronica and their interactions, because while mutual feelings are involved, they need to grow. I also don't want to erase Steve and Nancy's relationship because it was important to Steve's whole arc, just like the relationship between Billy and Veronica will be.

Enjoy the story! I only own Veronica.

---

Tears start rolling down Nancy's cheeks as she leans down to pull me up, not even reacting to my smell. "Oh my God, oh my God. You're alive."

"Barely." I croak. We stumble and I wince. "Ankle."

"Is it broken?" She quietly fusses, leading me away from the boulder, looking around.

"Sprain."

"And Barb."

"Took her. She... I..."

"Hey, hey, shh. Don't panic. I've got you. Jonathan's going to be so happy to see you." She whispers, pulling me through a thicket of trees. "Jonathan!" She screams. "Jonathan!" We rush through the woods, the Wheeler girl supporting my weight the whole time.

"C-careful. Monsters." I whimper. I actually *whimper*. And if I had water in my system, I'd be crying.

"I know, I know. We're running from one right now."

"Oh." I mumble. "Sleep?" I mutter.

"No, no, no. Not yet. Soon, I promise." We keep moving. "Jonathan!"

"Nancy! Nancy!"

"Jonathan! Where are you?" She screams back, voice panicked when she sees my body going a little lax. "C'mon, Vera. Stay with me. Don't you dare leave me!"

"I won't leave you." I whisper.

"Nancy! Just follow my voice!" I hear my best friend yell, and I start to smile.

"You were... looking? Hunt?"

She gives me an incredulous look, despite the panic on her face. "Why wouldn't we."

"Nancy!" Jonathan yells again, and I watch the girl who saved me straighten, feel her moving us faster.

"Jonathan!"

"Follow my voice Nancy, I'm right here! Nancy!" We turn, only to be met with one of the monsters, its face opening up as it screams. Nancy gasps but I've grown so used to them over during the past few-  
however-much-time-has gone on to truly react. Or maybe it's just the exhaustion.

But I let Nancy pull us away, hopefully towards where Jonathan is screaming. Where is he, anyway? How did they get here?

The growling continues and Nancy pulls me behind a tree, wrapping her arms around me in a hug that I also barely react to. The monster gets closer, stomping angrily. It's going to wake up the vines. The vines are going to be so angry.

I giggle at the prospect of vines fighting monsters, and Nancy puts a hand over my cracked and probably bloody mouth, shushing me.

The monster starts to stomp away, and we both hear Jonathan yell, "Nancy! Follow my voice!" I watch her head turn and follow her gaze to see a red, gooey hole.

"Pretty. Gross and Pretty." I murmur sleepily.

"Come on!" She tells me, eyes still teary. "Let's get you home."

The monster growls as Jonathan calls us, then suddenly I'm being pulled to the tree and pushed through. Nancy is right behind me, both of us small enough to budge through together, until she forces her hand out of the web of slime and it disappears.

"Jonathan!"

"Nancy!" My best friend yells back, and I start to feel air. Clean air, until eventually I'm tugged out of the tree and landing on a familiar body, Nancy curled around us. "Veronica?"

I blink, running a slimy hand over Jonathan's face.

"John. Missed you. Dustin?" I ask, Nancy sobbing in the background as she unties the flannel around my face. I breathe in the fresh air, hear the birds chirping and feel the wind blowing. I can hear something moving behind me, but I feel safe.

"He's fine." Jonathan is crying, too. "Everyone is looking for you. Your dad came, too. Mark and Craig have been helping Hopper with tracking."

"What -?" I break off into coughs, Jonathan and Nancy helping me stand. The ground disappears from under my feet and I loop up to see Jonathan carrying me like I'm a princess from a storybook. "Strong." I mumble, head tilting onto his shoulder as he and Nancy walk through the woods.

"What do they think happened?" I nod at Nancy's question. "You and Barb went missing." My heart clenches. "They think whoever had taken Will got you, too. That they got tired of him, and wanted two new toys to play with."

"Will?" I start to panic, dry cries coming out of my mouth.

"He's alive. We don't know how or exactly where, only that whatever took you has him still."

"How?" I ask, eyes starting to close, only for Jonathan to move me so I stay awake.

"Pictures."

"Pictures?"

Jonathan sighs, heavy. "I'll tell you later. Or never. So you don't yell at me."

"Why?"

"Nevermind." He mutters.

"Vera, what... what happened with Barb?" Nancy quietly asks.

I look over at her, at how guilty she looks asking, like she didn't mean to. "Dragged. Down. Tried to help. But I couldn't. Looked. Nothing. I'm sorry." I whimper.

"Shh, shh. No, it's okay. It's not your fault. We'll find her." Nancy tells me, holding my hand as make our way through the woods.

"I'm tired." I whisper.

"We need you awake. Okay? As soon as we get you help, you can sleep. But not right now."

I nod at Jonathan's words again. "Plan?"

"We're taking you to the hospital. We'll say we were out looking for you, too, and found you unconscious by a tree." Nancy formulizes, and I squeeze her hand. "Then you are going to get better, and we're going to take care of this."

"No!" I growl, feral. "Help."

"You're injured. Badly." Jonathan reminds me, gently.

"Help."

The two sigh, and Nancy speaks up. "We'll talk about that later. Let's just worry about getting you to the hospital."

The entire car ride over, Nancy sits next to me in the backseat, constantly poking me and asking me questions. *"Did you eat?/Nougat. Was there water?/No. How many monsters were there?/Too many. Did you fight one?/Too busy running."*

And while she asks me questions, Jonathan gets on a walkie talkie, relieved voices on the other side promising to, "Bring them in."

The minute I'm carried into the hospital, all I feel is chaos. I barely hear Jonathan and Nancy. All I feel are gloved hands holding me down as I thrash on a stretcher, crying out for them and mumbling in pain.

I can make out three people, though, when I'm wheeled down the hall. All three of them running after me, fighting to get through. "Leia!"

I tilt my head up, my little brother fading in the distance. "Dustin!" I shout back. "Let. Me. *Dustin!*" I scream, wailing as I'm brought into another room only to succumb to the darkness, mumbling as the world fades.

---

My mouth feels fuzzy. That's the first thing I register. My mouth is fuzzy, but not as dry as it was before. Eyes still closed, my tongue pokes out and runs across my lips. They're still split, but not as dry. My skin isn't as tight, either. My fingers twitch then press together, and my eyes open when I realize they're smooth. Not slimy. Smooth.

There's a slight glow in the room, but nothing too bright. More like the pre-sunrise lighting. A needle has pierced my left arm, the IV no doubt sending the necessary nutrition I missed into my veins. I can hear people snoring, and I look over to see three people hunched together. My lips pull up in a smile at the sight of my brother leaning against my mom, hand in my dad's hand, my parents' arms holding the three together. And even though it hurts to see the man who ruined it all, I tear up at how blotchy my dad's face is. How pale he looks. And even though it's been years since I last saw him in person, he looks exactly the same.

My mom looks gaunt, the rosiness in her cheeks gone. Her whole

body is tense. And Dustin... even asleep, he looks lost.

"D?" I ask, coughing a bit. "D? Wake up." He mumbles and shifts, opening his eyes and yawning as he sits up, only to fall onto the floor.

That sends my mom and dad flying out of their seats, awake and alert. "Dustin!" My mom fusses, helping him up.

I smile at the sight. "I'm the one... in the hospital." I say, and all three turn and look at me, blinking owlshly.

A moment of silence passes, until Dustin yells, "Holy shit, you're awake!" And the curly-haired boy collapses onto me, crying. I wince at the weight but lift my right hand to play with his curls. "You're alive." He whimpers. I nod, tears finally leaving my eyes after all that time being unable to shed them.

"I am. And I'm so sorry."

"Oh, my dumpling. Veronica. Oh, sweetheart." My mom cries, standing over us and reaching down a hand to play with my now loose blonde curls.

"Sorry. Didn't mean to scare you."

My mom shakes her head, wiping away tears. "It wasn't your fault. Nancy and Jonathan told us what you said. I'm sure the police will want to question you, too. When you feel better."

"Couldn't save Barb." I whisper. "Don't know where she is." And, oh God, I've just lied to my mother.

I broke my rule.

But as look into her eyes, see how much my lie means to her, that her baby wasn't stuck in some other dimension, almost gone forever and was only abducted by some psycho? I decide to let it go. Dustin was right. Sometimes, we have to lie to protect our asses... and the people we love most in this world.

My mom shakes her head, stroking my hair some more. "They'll find

her, Veronica."

"Okay." I mutter, and my guilt is mistaken for grogginess. Then I look down at Dustin. "Sorry. You're probably dirty. I stink."

He looks up and smiles a little. "No. Not anymore, at least."

"The doctors scrubbed you down." I look over to see my dad walking towards the bed, frown on his face. "A couple took some samples, but said they'd come across it before, and whatever you were covered in was harmless. I haven't seen them since."

"Probably busy." I murmur. And while part of me wants to yell at him to get out, another has decided it's tired of always pushing away. So I decide to extend an olive branch. "You taught me well. Couldn't hunt, but I could survive." I tell him.

Most of the tension leaves my dad's shoulders. "I guess I did. But you, you pulled it off. I'm proud of you, kid." I bite my lip, a warm feeling spreading in my chest. "I'm going to go get the doctor. I'll be back."

My mom wipes away a tear and kisses my forehead. "I'll come with you, Robert." The adults leave and Dustin helps prop me up against the pillows before moving his chair over to sit next to me.

"How's the girl?" I ask quietly.

"El is fine."

"El?"

"Eleven. She's like, a superhero. She made Troy pee his pants after the assembly for Will, before his funeral."

"Funeral? Jonathan said he's still -"

"Yeah." Dustin nods. "He's alive. He's where you were." Then he blinks, his face screwing up in anger. "You were gone for like, four days. The doctors said you were extremely malnourished and completely dehydrated. You were going to die, and you're asking me about the girl?"

"You're right, you're right. I'm sorry. I'm so sorry." I tear up again. "Dustin, oh it was awful. Where I was. It was like Hawkins, but it wasn't. It wasn't home. I missed home so much. I missed you, and I was so sad that the last thing you were going to remember about me was our stupid fight."

"Veronica -"

"No. Let me talk. Okay?" He nods. "You were right." He perks up a bit, and I roll my eyes. "The first and last time. You were right about lying, and I shouldn't have been so angry. I was being a hypocrite because I lie to other people all the time. I lie to the world about who I am. That I'm cold and indifferent about people. But really, I'm scared. I don't want to push people away because I don't like them. I don't want them to leave me, only I almost let myself leave you."

"What... what do you mean?" He asks.

I take his hand and squeeze it. "It was dark, there."

"The Upside Down? That's where you went, right?" Dustin asks, and I blink in confusion. "Mr. Clarke told us... you know what, it's a long story. But you were there?"

"Yes. I was in the Upside Down." It's strange, giving it a name, and yet it's so fitting. "It really was the Upside Down. Again, it was like Hawkins. Except it's always dark, these monsters are hunting, vines move, and I couldn't find any humans."

"You looked?"

"In the woods." I mutter. "I couldn't save them. I couldn't save anyone."

Before we can continue, footsteps approach the room. Dustin and I look up and see a doctor come in, his hair white and pushed back a bit. He's probably in his sixties, but he has this dangerous air to him. "Glad to see you awake, Ms. Henderson. I'm Dr. Brenner. Your other attendant had another patient to tend to, but I've been thoroughly briefed. I understand you've been through quite an ordeal."

He moves around me like a snake, checking vitals. I watch him



warily, distrustful. My gut clenches nervously.

Dustin looks a little scared, too, but our parents don't notice. They're too busy asking questions, Dr. Brenner answering. But I don't hear him, too focused on watching his movements.

"Now, Veronica." The white noise fades when I hear my name and I blink at him. "You're quite the lucky girl. You did a fine job wrapping your ankle, and after many x-rays we can safely say it's only a sprain. You've suffered heavy bruising on the left side of your body, but no broken bones. We checked for a concussion, but your exhaustion stemmed only from dehydration and malnutrition. We found a crumpled Three Musketeers bar in your pocket. Was that your only source of food?"

I look over at Dustin and smile at the awe on his face, the love in his eyes. "What can I say? Nougat's the best."

"Well, at the very least it kept you alive long enough to be found. As for the medication you were prescribed for anxiety and depression," I avoid the look of shock on my dad's face, "your doctor made sure to administer the medicine through your IV. It's only the dose for the day, but I'm sure it's helping after going without it for so long. Now, might I suggest we all leave and allow Veronica to get more rest? She's had a trying few days."

I narrow my eyes at his tone, though once again my parents don't catch it, too distracted by the fact I'm bruised but alive. "Thank you. Doctor."

He nods and waits patiently by the door for my family to follow, my mom kissing me on the forehead while my dad gives me a hesitant pat on the right shoulder.

Dustin takes his time, though, lingering when I lean into his ear. "I'm getting out. You won't be able to stop me. I don't trust him. Get to your friends, tell them what happened."

"Meet up later?"

I nod. "I'll call Jonathan and Nancy. Go. Keep your mouth shut, and

your eyes open."

"Copy, Leia." He kisses my temple. "I love you. And I'm sorry, too."

"Love you, too. Thanks for saving me." He looks confused, but is ushered away by the adults.

The door closes and I sit up more, slowly moving my legs off the bed. I'm still sluggish, but I don't feel as heavy as before. But whenever I close my eyes, I expect to be in the Upside Down. I'll never be able to get any of it out of my head. Barb's screams, the monsters snarling. The vines, the air, constantly being on the run. I don't know if I'll ever be okay. And it scares me, how much I welcomed death. How ready I was to be a goddamn hypocrite and leave.

God, my therapist is going to have a field day.

I wait for the feeling to return to my legs, then carefully grab onto my IV and wince as I pull the needle out, pressing my thumb to the spot and catching the blood. I have a ridiculous need to go to the bathroom, so I rush over and do my business for... well, it's been awhile, okay?

When I'm done and feel empty but not weak, I flush, pull up the underwear the hospital thankfully supplied and wash my hands, wincing when I see my reflection.

My sun kissed skin look dull, having lost its glow. My hair is wild and curlier than I've ever seen it, my big green eyes appearing almost doll-like compared to my slightly sunken in face. Bruises decorate my body, and like the man said are most apparent on the left side. I can feel my ribs through the blue hospital gown, and how my muscles seem even more prominent thanks to my bite-of-nougat-a-day diet.

With a sigh I leave the bathroom, walking around my bed in thought. I know I have to get out of here. I need to find Jonathan and Nancy. I don't really have a plan, or the patience at this point to make one. I've spent the past few days solely relying on instinct, and barring my episodes managed to survive.

I creep over to the door and open it, peering through. The halls are

empty, so I step out and close the door. I walk away, turning a corner right as a group of men and women in nurse clothes and white coats approach my door, opening it. What the hell?

"Find her. Brenner wants her at the Lab ASAP. Go!" A woman orders in a strong voice. My eyes widen and I take off down the hall, limping as I go but adrenaline forcing me to move.

A couple of nurses come walking down the same hall as me, but they're so busy gossiping that they ignore the way I blend into the wall. With a sigh of relief I limp some more, ducking when I see my parents in the waiting room, facing away from me. Dustin sees me, though, mouth open a bit. I groan when the adults start to turn and back up the other way, turning and bumping right into Dr. Brenner.

"Now, Ms. Henderson. I told you to rest." He reaches out to take my arm, and I just react.

I bring my left leg up to knee him, the man crumbling over in surprised pain.

"You ain't bring me to no lab, you son of a bitch." I growl, then limp furiously as a nurse notices I'm on the move and calls for security.

If she even is a nurse.

My bare feet pad on the cold ground as I hurry, turning corners and dodging security and hospital staff alike until I reach the changing room, having lost my pursuers. I can hear people in the bathroom so I walk over to the benches, smiling when I see a shelf between the lockers, stacked with packaged scrubs. Without wasting time, I reach for the neatly labeled "small" section and grab the first one.

Changing is easy, given how I just have to pull off my hospital gown and pull up the purple scrub pants and tie the top. I don't know what to do about the lack of shoes, but when I realize the ends of my pants are practically covering them I shrug. If I act like everything is fine, others will believe it.

I leave the changing room and wrap my hair in an untied bun before shoving the curls under the purple cap. The hospital is still a bit of a

mess when I come to the main area, and in the distance I can hear my mother yelling at someone. Dr. Brenner is missing, presumably taking charge in my would-be second abduction.

As people rush around me I stop at the nurses station, turning my back and picking up the phone.

The great thing about Nancy Wheeler being a good girl?

She gets her own private phone.

I dial her number and wait for the girl to pick up. She does, breathing heavily and sounding confused. "Hi. Whom am I speaking to?"

"Damn, girl, you sound so formal."

"Oh my God, you're awake." She says, sounding a little tearful. I nod even though she can't see me.

"Yeah. I am. Listen, my doctor is a total creep. People want to take me to a lab, so I decided to get the hell out. Can you come get me?"

"Of course, yes. Jonathan and I are on our way."

"Jonathan?"

"Mhmm." She sounds a little... embarrassed?

I just shrug, though. Neither one of them should be alone.

"Okay, good. Thank you. And if it isn't a problem... there's some place I need you to take me."

---

I'm leaning against the wall by the hospital doors when Jonathan's car pulls into the parking lot. Before they can get closer I rush over to them and hop into the back, wincing and rolling out my ankle. "Are you okay?" Jonathan immediately asks, and I shrug.

"Sprained ankle, bruises, no broken bones. Whatever was in the IV was packed with enough nutrition to get me moving. Physically, I'll be fine." Emotionally remains to be seen, but they're smart enough to

infer that.

"Where do you need to go?" Nancy asks.

"Home, please."

"You just escaped the hospital. What if people are looking for you there?" Jonathan asks me, as though I forgot.

"Well, I need a change of clothes and my bow and arrows."

"No. No way!"

"Why?" Nancy and Jonathan asking, looking back at me in surprise.

I blink. "So I can help you find Barb."

"You're injured and recovering from nearly dying. You should be in bed, at the very least!" Nancy argues.

"Nance, I was there for four days. I know the Upside Down better than anyone! The woods, at least." She sighs, exasperated, and I look down at my hands. "Please? Barb and I were taken together. She saved me. She made me climb. And when I tried to save her... I failed. Please, I have to find her. And in order to do so, I need my weapon."

Nancy looks back at me, Jonathan making the drive to my house. "Fine. Okay. But the minute you start to get tired, you're out."

"That's fair." I mutter, settling back in my seat.

My driveway is empty of all cars but one, the Millennium Falcon. Still we park a couple of houses down and get out, not wanting to draw too much attention. It's Saturday morning, though, if my calculations are correct. That means everyone is inside, eating breakfast and watching cartoons.

I pet my baby as I walk by her and open the door with the key hidden under a brick, tucking it back in its place as soon as the door open.

Before I can step inside, Jonathan and Nancy push me behind them and walk in first. I groan at their overprotectiveness, but stop when I see the scared looks they give me.

Fine. Just this once.

We walk in silently, closing the door behind us as we move through the house. There's no other sounds but our own, though, so we start to relax.

I leave them to stand guard and step into my room, keeping the door open a few inches. I'm still incredibly sore and a little hungry, but the thought of actually eating makes me a little nauseous. So I ignore the grumbles and instead cross over to my cabinet, pulling the hospital clothes off me and pulling on my own underwear, as well as a bra. I slowly pull on a long sleeve shirt and pull on a pair of jeans, looser on me now than before. I sit on the bed to put on my socks, wincing when I touch my sprained ankle but smiling when I realize how much better it feels than before, despite all my walking.

Sneakers are tied carefully, my left foot supported. I miss my green and white jacket, no doubt in some garbage bag at the hospital, and decide to put on a maroon and black bomber jacket instead.

I walk past my rescuers and into the bathroom, brushing my teeth for almost ten minutes before doing my business again. With the purple cap off my head and my curls released, I look a little like Medusa. I can't find it in myself to care, though. I just twist it into a french braid, ending just at the base of the back of my neck. Once again I'm shocked by how gaunt my face looks, and apply some chapstick to my lips before tucking the tube in my jacket pocket.

I want to cover my face, hide the bruises, but I don't want to waste precious time. Instead I limp back to my room and place my Indianapolis Colts blue and white snapback on my head, lowering it to cover my eyes.

I get down on the ground and reach under my bed, tugging out the locked storage container that holds what I need most. The sharp arrowheads glint in the morning light and I grab them all before sliding the container back under my bed and carefully standing. My

practice arrows are dumped onto my bed, the real one placed in the quiver. As always, my bow and speared ammo are placed in my duffle bag. I grab one last thing before I walk out of my room, carefully tucking it into my jacket pocket.

I nod to my friends and gesture for them to move before grabbing the house keys I'd left behind Tuesday night and locking up. I feel so much better, now that I'm wearing normal clothes. And shoes. And have my weapon of choice. Lighter. More like me, but not even the me I've been these past four years, the me at school at least. I feel like who I once was, only a little more mature. I'm not ready to spill my guts to the world, but... I feel like being open for once.

So I am.

"I was scared." I say as we drive away from my neighborhood and head towards town. Nancy and Jonathan are silent. "I'm always scared. But it was worse down there. And now, whenever I look around, it's like I can see that other world bleeding into ours." I breathe out. "You know, I was close to giving up. So close. But then I heard you. Both of you. It was like a dream. Only you were really there." I tear up and reach forward to grab Nancy's elbow, and her eyes become wet as well. "You saved me, Nance. You too, John. I'm never going to forget what happened down there. But it gets a little easier, when I remind myself that it ended with you bringing me home." I sniffle and look away. "That was me, trying to be open. I know I act like I don't trust people. It's true that I don't trust most. But you two, well, for lack of a better phrase, I trust you both with my life." Nancy sends me an award-winning smile, and I catch the proud look in Jonathan's eyes from the rearview mirror.

Look at me, thawing in front of my friends.

Maybe *this* is really the Upside Down?

---

Nancy and Jonathan make the executive decision to have me wait in the car while they stop at Hunting & Camping, not wanting me to draw any attention. I agreed, though, easily. Mark has a big mouth.

I twiddle my thumbs as I wait, humming to myself. I had given them

a pretty extensive list - a few packs of .38s, a gas tank, bear traps, lighter fluid, the works. Because let's face it, I'm the Huntress around here.

Bored out of my mind though and feeling a bit like a dog, I close my eyes. The world flashes in a series of images until I'm seeing vines, ash, and a dark fog. I gasp, fighting to get out of there, something wrapping around me like a vice. I can't breathe, the vines are getting tighter.

It's that day all over again - whichever it was. I had been running through the woods, only for two vines to wrap around me and pull me down on my ass. I had thrashed and kicked, tugging and pulling on them as the slimy flora got tighter and tighter, slithered higher and higher. I reached out my hands, scrambling to find something, anything. I had almost cried in relief when my right limb wrapped around a sharp rock and I stabbed it all over the vines, until they pulled off me in pain.

Only this time I don't have a rock. But I do have a knife. I take it out of my jacket - the one I had gotten from the infamous hunting trip - and slash.

"Veronica!" I open my eyes and realize my knife is inches from the headrest of the driver's seat, Nancy and Jonathan both looking at me from outside. I smile innocently and tuck the blade back in. "What the hell are you doing?" Jonathan whisper yells, looking around nervously.

"Practicing." Is all I say, the lie slipping out easily.

*I'm protecting myself, and I'm protecting them.*

"Hey, Nance!" I hear someone yell, my female friend turning as a passing car honks. "Can't wait to see your movie!"

That's Fred, a dick on the basketball team. One of many, actually.

I get out of the car before either one of my friends can stop me, looking at Nancy in confusion. "Okay, what the hell is Fred talking about?"



"What the hell was that?" Jonathan asks at the same time.

"I don't know." Nancy looks around, as puzzled as we are. Then she gets a look on her face, and starts to walk away.

"What?" Jonathan asks as she passes him, wordlessly. The two of us look at each other and rush after her, pushing past fellow Hawkins citizens as we move. "What? Hey! Where are you going?" Jonathan calls. I limp after them, the last to arrive at the movie theatre, the Hawk. Both my companions are staring up at the marquee, and my vision goes red when I see what was written. "Starring Nancy The Slut Wheeler" has been graffitied in red next to the "All The Right Moves" sign.

My breathing gets heavy, and I picture vines around it instead, crawling and hiding the ugly words.

And when I hear Tommy H's distinct laugh in the alley next to the theater, I know exactly who did it. But before I can storm in, Nancy holds me back, clenching her teeth. "Stay. They can't see you. I'll handle this." I watch as she storms away, towards the laughter, Jonathan pleading with her to just *wait*.

I stand at the corner of the alleyway, hidden from sight but not from their words, Jonathan closer to the alley than to me, and I tilt my head when I see the worry painted all over my best friend's face. Then I smile when I hear a loud slap, knowing it was Nancy. "What is wrong with you?"

"What's wrong with me?" Steve asks in disgust. "What's wrong with you? I was worried about you. I can't believe that I was actually worried about you." Steve scoffs, my chest tightening at the hurt in his tone. *Traitor*. My heart is a traitor.

"What are you talking about?"

"I wouldn't lie if I were you." Carol responds, and I grit my teeth, Jonathan holding me back with just one hand, shaking his head before disappearing around the corner. I huff and cross my arms. "You don't want to be known as the lying slut now, do you?"

"Speak of the devil." Tommy announces. I peer over the side, face hidden behind the back steps of the theater. "Hi."

"You came by last night." Nancy pieces together, and I narrow my eyes. What happened last night?

"Ding, ding, ding! Does she get a prize?" Carol asks sardonically.

"Look, I don't know what you think you saw, but it wasn't like that." Nancy tells Steve.

He just scoffs again. "What, you just let him in your room to... study?"

"Or for another pervy photo session?" Tommy asks.

Okay, what the actual hell is going? What the fuck did I miss?

"We were just -"

"You were just, what? Finish that sentence. Finish that sentence." Steve bites out, and I worriedly shift, wincing when my full weight goes onto my ankle. I move back. He scoffs. "Go to hell, Nancy."

"Come on Nancy. Let's just leave." Jonathan suggests.

"You know what Byers? I'm actually kind of impressed. I always took you for a queer but I guess you're just a little screw-up like your father. Oh, yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah. That house is full of screw-ups." My vision gets red again as I watch Steve start pushing Jonathan as he walks away. "You know, I guess I really shouldn't be surprised. A bunch of screw-ups in your family." Jonathan stops, and Steve keeps going, even as Nancy tells him to just keep walking. "Your mom... I mean, I'm not even surprised what happened to your brother. I'm sorry to be the one to have to tell you but the Byers, their family is a disgrace to the entire -"

And with a bam, Steve shuts up, grunting. I watch in fear as he roars and leaps at Jonathan, throwing him on the car and punching my best friend in the face before slamming him onto the ground. Before he can lean down and beat the shit out of him, I step away from the alley corner.

"Stop!" I scream, my hat in hand, visible for everyone to see. My friends are shaking their heads at me, Nancy holding up a recently-punched Jonathan, but I limp forward.

Steve takes a step back, his brown eyes wide and lips parted, like the air was just taken right out of his lungs. "Veronica?" He whispers, staring at me, fist unfurling. His warm eyes flicker worriedly over the bruises on my face. I can hear Tommy, Carol, and Nicole murmuring, looking at me like they've seen a ghost.

"Steve." I respond coldly, advancing towards him. This time though, he comes forward.

"Where... Where were you? What happened?" He lifts a hand to touch the bruise on my chin, but I don't flinch. He strokes it for a second, fingers light before he pulls his hand back. I don't have time to decipher what his wet eyes mean. Instead, I let my green eyes turn to ice. Because I know I said I'd take a raincheck on it, but right now I can't.

The Ice Queen is back by unpopular demand.

"Where I was made Hell look like a *good dream*. Nancy and Jonathan found me, after I got out. I don't know what you think happened between them, but it didn't. Because she likes you, and would never hurt you." I glare even harder, words coming out chilly. Even Carol is backing away. "You. Are an asshole. How dare you say that about the Byers when they're grieving? How dare you say that shit to my best friend?"

"Veronica -"

I shake my head. "No. This is the part where I talk, and you listen." I stab at his chest with the tips of my fingers, pushing him back. "All of you." I look around at the gathering of dicks, smiling wickedly and licking my still cracked lips. "Let me be clear. You all may be big fish here, but out there? It's a big world. A whole ocean." I scoff, smirking sardonically. "You're barely plankton." I look up at Steve, and even though I like him, right now I *hate* him. "Stop acting like you're God's greatest gift to mankind, and get some goddamn humility and perspective." I growl. "Because you won't get very far in life by acting

like this, and you're going to end up peaking in high school. I can see it now. King Steve, wasting away in a house, unhappy and living out the rest of his life through his kids. Wanting nothing more than to be back in the 'good old days'."

He glares, coming closer, brown eyes pained. "Oh yeah? Well you're not that great, either. I bet whoever had you let you go because they knew you're nothing." I bite the inside of my lip. "How does it feel, to know even a psychopath doesn't want you?"

"A little relieved, to be honest." I snark back, heart stuttering.

"Yeah, well, he should have let Barb go, instead of you." My brain flashes with her shrill cries, and I feel her hands clenching mine, so I squeeze them shut, only for my nails to dig into my palms and break skin. I keep glaring up at him, refusing to move away. In the background I can hear my best friend struggling, Nancy holding him back. "You and Byers should get together, when Nancy's had her fill of him. She's good at that, using guys -"

Before anyone can stop him, Jonathan is running past me and socking Steve in the face. "Jonathan, stop!" I try to pull him back, only to stumble on my bad ankle. Nancy catches me, and we hear a cop car in the distance.

"Go! Get out of here! Go!" Nancy orders, ponytail swinging. I nod and push past Steve's three friends as they try to stop the fight, tugging my cap back onto my head as I turn a corner and walk around the back. I can hear the cop car getting closer and hide in another alley, head bowed down and my hands in my pockets. With the four bullies running past me and Powell yelling, "I've got this one!" I can only assume Jonathan's being cuffed. Which means I have to get into the police station undetected.

Well, that all escalated very quickly.

## 5. The Bathtub

Hi all, and welcome to my *Stranger Things* Steve Harrington/OC story! It's been a long, long time coming. Seriously. Since 2017 long.

I just updated the first chapter, so this is a little different than the original I posted. In this story, we've got the Ice Queen of Hawkins, the older-but-shorter-by-season 2 sister of Dustin Henderson, because he deserves an older sibling. She's Veronica, and even though *Heathers* came out in 1989 I've taken the liberty of borrowing some of my favorite quotes because Winona Ryder Easter Eggs. Seriously, I cannot overstate my love for that movie. Anyway, there's more of a backstory for the Henderson family, including adding the dad to the "asshole fathers club", co-president with Lonnie Byers, the prick. Expect explicit language because, hello, *Stranger Things* isn't known for censoring language.

Fair warning, while this is Steve/OC the season 2 part will include Billy/OC, but not for long. I promise. He's a great villain, but he's a dick until he isn't. Just wanted to get that out of the way. Because again, he's a dick. But I'm also treating their relationship a bit like Jackson Whittemore and Lydia Martin's from *Teen Wolf*, especially with the later outcome. And there will also be inbetween chapters between ST 1 and ST 2, then ST 2 and ST 3, adding some more things as well as a deeper dive into how Max and Billy's relationship changes, because let's be honest that wasn't really commented on in ST 3, and I'd like to see it. But this will not be a Billy Hargrove/OC endgame story. Not like that.

This chapter takes place during 1x07, following Jonathan's arrest. Veronica sets out to follow her friends, and ends up running into the only two adults who seem to realize something else is going on in Hawkins. We're still seeing snippets of PTSD, but I'm not really going to get into that until after 1x08, as Veronica is still dealing with everything else. But I'm planning on writing a few chapters as character-development "filler"

before writing the 2x01 chapter, so things will be explored. This chapter is pretty long, covering the entirety of 1x07, and weirdly took the longest to write. We have some Hopper and Veronica moments, including a little backstory about them because I noticed in writing the first chapter how familiar they were with each other, and I thought, "Hmm, interesting, didn't mean for that to happen, let's see why it is?" There's also a lot of Veronica and Nancy bonding. Those two girls were good friends, but Veronica still had a lot of her walls up and Nancy wasn't quite as good as Barb at bringing them down. Ergo, they weren't *close*. But since Nancy was really the one who saved Veronica from the Upside Down and both cared equally about Barb, I wanted to see them skip a little past "best friends" and become sisters. I also have a few cute scenes with Veronica and the Party, as well as Veronica and El. They haven't seen each other since the second chapter and never even exchanged names, but Veronica was the one who patched her up, so El's attached to her. She's essentially a duckling who imprinted on Veronica.

Enjoy the story! I only own Veronica.

---

I keep my head down as I walk through town, cursing under my breath when I see Jonathan's car being towed away.

Then it becomes more of an "oh shit" situation because I remember not only that my bow and arrows are in there, but so are all the supplies they got at Hunting & Camping, which won't look great. So I move faster through town, wincing when my ankle rolls a bit. I really want to put my hand against the brick walls around me, but every time I do all I can feel are vines covering my hands, just like they were covering the Harrington house in the Upside Down. The air's too fresh, now, and it gets hard to breathe.

When I reach the police station, I crouch behind a row of bushes, trying my hardest to remain unseen. I avoid putting my fingers in the ground, wary of roots coming to life and wrapping around me, squeezing like a boa constrictor.

See, if I had a walkie talkie I could try to get in contact with my brother. But I didn't grab one, because I'm a moron who isn't thinking

straight.

*I should have done a lot of things. I should have grabbed a walkie. I should have stayed with Barb. I should have died. I would have died, if I wasn't running on a little luck at the end of my time in the Upside Down.*

I don't know how long I stay there, crouched in the bushes of the station, as quiet as I was in the woods of Not-Hawkins. It's not until I hear a familiar voice shouting at someone that I shoot up. "Joyce!" I call, just between a whisper and a yell.

She stops and looks around, Hopper next to her. When both adults see me, I'm treated to a wonderful show of their faces going from shock, to surprise, to happiness (on Joyce's part, that is, Hopper just looks a little relieved), to anger and impatience.

"You are supposed to be in the hospital!" Joyce growls, storming up to me as I climb over the bushes and limp over to her, throwing my arms around her neck and tearing up. "Oh my God. You had us all so scared. Where the hell were you?" She asks, shaking my shoulders a little as I cry silently.

"I-I was taken." I bite my lip and look up at Hopper. "Didn't you tell her I was taken?"

"We've been a little busy, Robin Hood." He grunts. "I take it you're here for your best friend?"

I nod, wiping away my tears and leaning onto Joyce, who's arms are around me protectively. "Yeah. And Nancy."

"Nancy Wheeler?" She asks me as we follow Hopper inside the station. I don't have a chance to answer as she becomes focused on her son. Jonathan's nursing an icepack on his right knuckles, Nancy sitting next to him and an unhelpful Callahan at the desk behind them. "Hey, what happened?" Joyce asks, coming closer. I keep my head down, but Powell still notices me.

"You're not supposed to be here. What's going on, Chief? She escaped the hospital, we've got men looking everywhere -"

"None of your damn business, Callahan. Leave it. No one radios this

in. Got it?" Hopper gripes, and the man closes his mouth.

Joyce continues, though, pointing at her son's cuffed wrists. "Jonathan? What's going on here?"

"Ma'am." Callahan walks towards her.

"I'm fine." Jonathan mumbles, pouting a bit.

"Why is he wearing handcuffs?"

"Well, your boy assaulted a police officer, that's why." Callahan sasses, acting as patronizing as he usually is.

"Take them off." Joyce orders.

"I'm afraid I cannot do that."

"Take them off!" Joyce yells, and I wince as the volume makes my ears ring.

"You heard her. Take 'em off." Hopper tells his man.

"Chief, I get everyone's emotional here, but there's something you need to see." Powell speaks up.

*Oh, boy.*

---

Flo, the receptionist at the station, pulls up a chair for me to sit in. No one asks me any questions, not wanting to go against the Chief's orders. Nancy takes my hand, squeezing it nervously.

A few minutes later, Hopper returns with Callahan and Powell. He's holding one of the boxes containing our monster-hunting gear, as well as my duffle. The box and bag are dropped onto the desk, my fingers itching to grab my bow.

"What is this?" Joyce asks, riffling through the box.

"Why don't you ask your son? We found it in his car." Hopper states, tone even. He's scariest when his tone is even.



"What?"

Jonathan ignores his mother. "Why are you going through my car?" He glares up at the cops.

"Is that really the question you should be asking right now?" Hopper asks in return, putting his hands on the desk and leaning forward. "I wanna see you in my office. All three of you." We nod and stand, Jonathan stepping in front of Nancy to wrap his good arm around my waist in support. Hopper takes the duffle and the box with him as we all march to his office, and he locks the door behind him. "Sit." He orders, and though he sounds as irritated as usual he brings over a stool for me to rest my ankle, Jonathan lending me his ice.

Joyce pulls out one of the chairs at his desk and sits in front of us, Hopper leaning against his desk with his arms crossed. "What's with the hunting gear, kids?"

"Something took Will." Jonathan gruffly spills. "A monster. We're going to find Will and kill that thing."

"A monster." Hopper nods, running his hand down his face. "Right."

"It's true." I murmur, looking off into space. "A monster took him."

"What the hell are you talking about, Robin Hood?"

"Hopper!" Joyce snaps at the man, and I feel someone taking my hands. My eyes flick over to hers. "What happened, dear?"

"You won't believe me. You won't believe us."

"Answer her question, Veronica." Hopper grunts at me. I look down and pull my hands back, twiddling them. "Now."

"I... Barb and I... we were taken. By this thing. To... to another world. The Upside Down. It looks like here, but. But there are vines everywhere. Living vines that squeeze you. Other monsters, too. Like wolves." I bite my lip, trying not to close my eyes. Don't let me see it, don't let me see it. "Barb helped me climb out of the pool -"

"What pool?" Hopper asks.

"Steve Harrington's pool. Only the one in the Upside Down is empty. I got up and I tried to help her up too, only I wasn't strong enough." I let out a sob. "I-she... it pulled her away from me. I tried to follow, I did. I promise I did! But she... they just disappeared. And I was alone. Until Nancy found me, and she got me out." I cry harder, nails digging into the palms of my hands, drawing blood as I shake. "I was so hungry, and thirsty. There wasn't water or food I could trust. I was so scared. I'm sorry I was so scared." I plead, looking at Joyce, who's crying too. "I tried to find Barb. And I had this idea, that maybe Will got taken too. So I searched the whole forest. I swear I did. But I couldn't breathe, even with my mouth covered."

"Veronica, hey -" Hopper tries to interrupt me, but I keep going.

"I thought I couldn't breathe because of my anxiety. I thought it was just one long panic attack. But it wasn't only that. The air, it's so... polluted. Thin. I'm sorry, Joyce. I promise I tried." I plead, curling in on myself.

In the blink of an eye, a woman who's become a second mother to me has carefully pulled me up and into her arms, holding on for dear life. "Shh, shh. I know you did, Veronica. I'm so proud of you. You did so good."

My eyes flick over to Hopper. "My doctor, this morning. He... he said his name was..." I think for a second. "Brenner. Dr. Brenner. I didn't trust him, so I snuck out. There were these other nurses and doctors who broke into my room when I'd left. They said he wanted me brought to 'the Lab'. I ran. I mean, I think I kneed him first, it was all just... chaos." He nods, stroking his moustache. "I stole a nurse's uniform. Then I called Nancy. I want to find that thing, too."

"What did this doctor look like?" He asks, Joyce releasing me as I walk towards him. He pulls out a notepad and pen, staring at me expectantly.

"Tall. White hair. He looked too... professional. Not like the other doctors." He nods as he writes. Then he puts down the pad and looks down at Nancy and Jonathan, stepping to the side a bit and pushing back some stuff on his desk so I can sit on it.

"Alright. We know this one's story. How did you two get involved?" The chief asks, Joyce sitting back down.

"Well, I was looking for Will. In the woods. And I stopped to take a break. I was taking pictures, and..." Jonathan trails off, but I know him well enough to see the guilt in his eyes, "well, I guess I caught something."

"Yeah. I went to go check on him, when we were in school. And I wanted to know if he'd heard from Vera. Only I found him developing pictures, and when one came out of that thing. In the woods. So we decided to go looking for it." Nancy speaks up, not as timidly as she used to. "We came across this deer. It'd been hurt, badly. Before we could put it out of its misery, it was pulled away. We looked around, tried to track its blood, and I saw this hole in a tree. I went through. I was there, where Veronica was taken."

"The Upside Down." I remind her, voice a whisper, and she nods.

"Yeah. Saw the monster. Found Vera. Then we got out."

"Here." Jonathan pulls out a developed photo, and I look away from the monster in Hopper's hands. "It's the blood, we think. It's like a shark."

Hopper nods. "So, blood draws this thing?" He clarifies.

"We don't know." Jonathan admits, and Nancy nods, blue eyes wide.

"It's just a theory."

I close my eyes, remembering the pool. Barb, and her screams. The sound of her blood dripping into the water -

"Barb." I gasp, opening my eyes. Everyone looks at me. "That night, Nance, remember? She cut her hand." Nancy nods. "I put a bandaid on it, but when we went to wait outside for you, she took it off to inspect it. The thing came and pulled her away, only I grabbed onto her too. I don't think it was interested in me." Hopper pats my arm in a surprisingly comforting way, while Joyce sighs and stands up.

"We need to talk." She grits out at Jonathan, who nods morosely and

follows her out, closing the door behind him.

"How's your ankle feeling?" Nancy asks me. I shrug, rolling it out a bit.

"Not so bad, now that it's wrapped properly. Hurts a bit. I think the painkillers are wearing off." I tell her, smiling softly.

"Veronica." I look up at Hopper, who gives me one of his most rare expressions - a soft smile. "You're a fighter. I hope you know that. Ain't many who could have survived what you did."

I almost didn't, but I appreciate the sentiment. "Thanks, Chief." He nods.

Any other discussion is prevented when an exasperated woman yells, "I want an apology!" Hopper steps away from me and leaves the room, brushing past Joyce and Jonathan. The remaining three are unable to prevent me from following him, as silently as I would walk in the Upside Down, gingerly using my left foot.

I peer around the corner, watching Powell and Callahan attempt to calm down the woman. Her arm is wrapped around a familiar looking boy, his arm in a sling. It's Troy, the bastard who bullies Dustin. Finally, someone gave him a taste of his own damn medicine.

"Ma'am, I need you to calm down." Callahan requests, panic in his voice when he talks to the distraught mother of the psychopathic middle schooler.

"What is your name, Deputy?"

"Well, I'm an officer, okay?" He awkwardly chuckles, and I roll my eyes.

No wonder Hopper's always in a mood. His officers are idiots.

"Name and badge number, both of you!"

Hopper had remained unseen when he stepped into the main office, but claps his hand as he walks towards the woman. "What the hell is going on here?"

"Chief." Powell looks over at him.

"These men are humiliating my son!" Soccer mom cries out, and I have to bite down on my lip to prevent a laugh from escaping. Serves him right, the little dipshit.

Callahan panics. "No, no, no. Okay, that's not true."

"Yes!" The woman yells back.

"There was some kind of fight, Chief -" Powell attempts to explain the situation, only for Troy's mom to interrupt.

"A psychotic child *broke his arm!*"

"A little girl, Chief, a little one." Callahan demonstrates the height difference, like that'll help.

"That tone! Do you hear that tone?"

"Honestly, I'm just trying to state a fact!" Callahan tries, again.

"I don't have time for this!" Hopper cuts in, having completely given up on everyone in the room.

"It was a little girl -"

"Will you please just take a statement..." Hopper interrupts Callahan and points at the door, but I can't hear what else he says.

Callahan gives him a thumb's up, though. "Yes."

Hopper turns and walks away, noticing me before I can hide. His eyes narrow and I smile innocently.

"So what did this girl look like?" Powell asks.

"She had no hair and she was bleeding from her nose." Before I can stop it, my innocent smile falls and morphs into a look of shock. Eleven.

Hopper stops too, throwing me a confused look before turning back around. Troy keeps talking. "Like a freak!"

"What'd you just say?" Hopper asks, walking back over to the small group.

"I said she's a freak!" He yells at the Chief.

"No, her hair. What'd you say about her hair?" He asks, looking down at the bully.

Troy shrugs. "Her head's shaved. She doesn't even look like a girl. And..."

"And what?" Hopper asks as the boy trails off.

"Tell the man, Troy." His mom gently orders, the bully nodding as he refocuses on the Chief.

"She can... do things."

"What kind of things?"

I gasp, remembering what Dustin had told me in the hospital. *"Eleven. She's like, a superhero. She made Troy pee his pants after the assembly for Will, before his funeral."*

I wasn't really in the right mindset, then - you know, escaping Hell, and all. But shit, things just got stranger.

"What kind of things?" Hopper asks, and Troy gulps.

"Like... make you fly. *And piss yourself.*"

"What?" Powell asks, amused. I hide my snort while Hopper holds out his hand to stop Powell from continuing.

"Was she alone?"

Troy shakes his head, then answers the Chief's question. "She always hangs out with those losers." This bitch.

"Losers? What losers?"

"Wheeler, Sinclair. Henderson." Troy mumbles, and when Hopper turns to give me a look I bring my body back behind the corner, out

of sight.

"Okay. Powell, take a statement. I have something to take care of." I hear Hopper announce, Troy's mother calling out,

"What about the girl? What about those boys?"

Hopper ignores her, though, and takes my small elbow in his large hand. "What else didn't you tell us?"

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"-it was raining. We went to Mirkwood, to look around. I brought my bow, just in case." I add when Joyce throws me a look, Hopper busy driving us to the Wheeler house. I had told him at the station that we brought the girl to Mike's. "I cleaned her up. She's nice, Hopper, I swear. She's just a kid. A scared kid." I reiterate, voice having lost its harshness since I told off Steve and his friends. There's no one to be an Ice Queen for right now.

"Jesus Christ." Hopper mutters, no doubt bemoaning my stupidity.

"Look, it was a rough night, okay? Mistakes were made! I wanted to tell you, I did, but... but that seemed like a bad idea at the time." I cross my arms, Jonathan patting my knee in solidarity while Nancy bites her lip, eyes disappointed when she looks at me. "Oh, don't you look at me in that tone of voice." I growl at her, pointing, and she rolls her eyes. "Listen, our plan was just to have Mike sneak her out when he left for school and have her ring the doorbell. We figured Mrs. Wheeler would know what to do, call the right people."

Hopper sighs again. "Kids." He mutters.

"Hey, how was I to know that didn't happen? I was a little busy being abducted and dragged to another dimension." I bite out, and those judging me stopped at the reminder. "Yeah, I said it. Abducted and dragged. So let's maybe not dig into my poor life choices right now."

"It's okay, dear, it's okay." Joyce soothes me, reaching back to take my hand. My other one clutches tightly onto my duffle. We had to leave the monster-hunting box in Hopper's office, but I don't feel safe without my weapon.

Finally, Hopper pulls up near Nancy's house, only to slam on the breaks. "Shit!" He yells in the car, getting out and pulling a pair of binoculars with him.

Nancy follows him, too, and I naturally go as well. Us two girls clutch onto each other when we see cars parked in front of the Wheeler house, men in suits walking in and out, all official-like.

"Dustin." I whisper, hand on my mouth.

"I have to go home." Nancy tells Hopper, who shakes his head and keeps observing the scene through his binoculars.

"No, you can't."

"My mom... my dad are there."

"They're going to be okay." Hopper tries to reassure her, but Nancy is walking away and towards the gate blocking us from her house. Hopper rushes after her. "Hey, hey, hey, hey."

"Let go!" She orders, trying to pull her arm out of his strong grasp. "Let go!"

"Hey, listen to me!" He crouches down a bit to look at her. "Listen to me. The last thing in the world we need is them knowing you're mixed up in all this. They're most likely searching for Veronica, so we can't draw more attention." I shuffle awkwardly.

"Mike, is over there - Dustin is over there!" She gestures between us, frantic. "Our little brothers!" I get more nervous, breathing in and out sharply. If anything happens to Dustin, I'm going to burn Hawkins to the ground.

"They haven't found them. Not yet at least." He gestures to the sky, and I follow the movement to see the helicopter scoping an area not too far from the house. Hopper leads Nancy back to the car, wordlessly forcing us both in.

"That's for them?" Nancy asks on the way in, surprise written all over her face.



"Come on, get in the car." Hopper orders, slamming the door behind her first, then getting behind the wheel and doing the same with his.

Joyce turns in her seat to look directly between Nancy and me, Hopper doing the same. "Veronica, do you have any idea where they can be?"

I blink, thinking. "The only other places they would go are one of the Party's houses. I told Dustin in the hospital that I didn't trust the doctor, so he's probably steering clear of our place. Other than that, there's Mirkwood, but I'm not sure they'd be there either." I shake my head, tearing up. "I'm sorry, normally I know, it's just I was gone for so long, and -"

"*Breathe*, Veronica." Hopper orders, and I nod. "Nancy?" The Chief asks the girl who saved me. She shakes her head, just as terrified as I am for her own brother. "Look, we need to find them before they do. If you -"

"I don't know where they could have gone."

"I need you to think."

"I don't know! We haven't talked a lot." She admits, guilt laced in her words. "I mean, lately..." She sighs and sinks down in her seat.

"Is there... is there any place that your parents don't know about, that he might go?" Joyce asks.

"I-I-I don't know."

"I might." Jonathan announces, and we look at him.

"What?" Hopper asks.

He bites his lip. "I don't know where they are, but I think I know how to ask them." I gasp, understanding what he's saying.

"We can't go to my place -"

"You didn't bring -"

"If I had it with me, we could've -"

"Don't get snippy with me, Ver. So -"

"We need to go to yours." I finish, the two of us thinking on the same frequency.

"Okay, what the hell?" Hopper asks, and Jonathan and I look at the adults. Joyce has a soft smile on her face, while the Chief remains confused.

"Sorry, sometimes we -"

"Finish each other's sentences."

"Don't interrupt." I point at him without looking. "But yes."

"That answers nothing, Robin Hood."

I roll my eyes, and Jonathan speaks up. "Will's walkie is still at home, in his room."

"And our brothers never leave the house without theirs, at least, not when they're on an adventure." I add.

"So we need to go home, mom." Jonathan tells Joyce.

Hopper sighs and starts the car, reversing. "You two better be right, because we're running out of options."

We all sit back as the Chief drives to the Byers house, the three of us holding each other's hands.

The minute we step inside the house, I realize I missed a lot during my time in the Upside Down. The walls are covered in strings of Christmas lights, the house darker and messier than I've ever seen it. Someone painted the alphabet on one wall, a bulb over each letter.

"Whoa!" Nancy gasps, the two of us holding each other's arms. We keep moving, though, following Jonathan and the two adults into Will's room. As the others look around for the walkie, Nancy helps me sit on the bed.

Moments later, Joyce calls out, "I've got it!" She gets out from under the bed and hands the device to me, Nancy wrapping an arm around my shoulders while Jonathan gives me a reassuring smile.

I sigh and turn it on, hoping it's set to the right frequency. "Gimli, this is Huntress, do you copy?" Radio silence. *Gimli, because Dustin's Dungeons & Dragons character is a Dwarf.* I sigh, and try Mike this time. "Dungeon Master, this is Huntress. I repeat, this is Huntress, do you copy? Lancelot, do you copy?" *Lancelot, because Lucas is the Knight.* "I repeat, this is Huntress. Do you copy?"

"Give it to me!" Hopper orders, but I shake my head and clutch it tighter.

"No, no. They probably think it's a trap! Dustin knows I didn't trust Brenner, he knows something was up at the hospital. Just give me a couple of more tries." I ask, and he nods, sighing.

"Okay, okay."

I breathe out. "Don't you two have that code?" Jonathan patiently reminds me, kneeling on the floor in front of where I'm sitting.

"We haven't used it in years, I don't -" I start to panic, and he clutches my hands. I smile at the brotherly action, but my mind is still a storm.

"*You do.* I know you're freaking out right now. I know a lot has happened. But I need you to focus. Get out of your head, and save your brother and his friends. You're Veronica Leigh Henderson, and you are too stubborn, proud, and loving to give up." I nod at his words, then hold down the button one last time, closing my eyes and remembering.

*"If one of us gets taken by a Russian -"*

*"Oh my God, Dustin. That's not going to happen. We live in Hawkins." I tell my ten-year-old brother.*

*"Well, if it does. Or if one of us ever gets into trouble, we each have to have our own code. You know, to make sure the other knows we're safe. I'm thinking -"*

I open my eyes and smile. "Ye said I was no archer, but say so now again!" I quote from *The Merry Adventures of Robin Hood*, the very book that made me pick up a bow in the first place.

I hear something click on the other side, and smile. **"Hammer and tongs! I am so torn between rage and joy, that if I do not burst, it will be a marvel!"** Dustin's voice rings loud and clear, the same words spoken by Gimli the Dwarf in *The Two Towers*.

I let out a breathless laugh. "Oh my God, Dustin!"

**"Sis!"**

**"Veronica!"** I hear Mike and Lucas shout together, just as joyful. **"We copy, over."**

"Roger that. Requesting your position, over."

**"Are you alone? Over."** Mike asks, presumably taking the walkie from my brother.

"Negative. I'm with Nancy, Jonathan, Mrs. Byers, and Hopper. Over."

**"My sister? Over."**

"Copy, did I stutter? Over." I sass. Hopper moves his hand. "Dungeon Master, I need your position, over."

There's some mumbling, then he sighs. **"The Junkyard, over."**

My eyes flick up at Hopper. "Copy. We're coming for you, over."

I shut off the walkie before the kids can protest. The Chief ruffles my loose braid. "Good job, hooligan. You four, stay here. I'll go get them."

"I'm coming with you." I announce, standing up.

"Veronica -"

"My brother is there. There's no way in hell I'm sitting back. Not when I can do something."

"You have a sprained ankle and just survived another dimension. You need to rest."

Now, this voice doesn't usually work on adults. They're not as easy to make submit as kids. But I try, anyway, tone as cold as ice. "I will rest when my brothers are safe." I claim responsibility for the Party. "They're alone, and scared, and probably being hunted down by guys with guns. There is a little girl with them, who looked like she'd been put through hell even before everything happened. So no, I'm not staying here." I glare up at him. "You said I was a fighter. Let me be your backup."

"You just said the men looking for you will have guns."

"I won't be going in unarmed, remember?"

Hopper sighs, running a hand over his face. "Shit." He then points down at me. "This is a terrible idea."

I grin wickedly. "And that's why it's going to work."

"Goddamn kids." He mutters, then storms out of the bedroom. I turn to look back at the other three, all staring at me nervously.

"I'm going to get our brothers, Nance."

I start to follow Hopper out, only for someone to pounce on me, wrapping their arms around my body tightly. "You better come back." Jonathan mutters, shaking with fear. "I'm not losing you again, rockstar."

"John, I'm coming back. You're not losing a sister." I promise. He nods and gives me one last squeeze before letting go.

"Robin Hood, if you don't get your ass out here I'm leaving without you!" Hopper shouts. I grimace at the volume but limp after him, leaving my friends and second mother behind.

"Be safe!" Joyce calls after me, and I smile.

"Promise." I call back before slamming the door shut behind me. Hopper is in his own car, parked next to Joyce's. I jump into the

passenger seat and slam the door closed. Hopper reverses and turns, driving in the direction of the Junkyard.

We travel in silence, and I use the time to pull my bow and quiver out of my duffle, checking the sharp arrowheads. I pull out the hunting knife in my pocket, sharpening a few dulled tips.

"This is a bad idea." Hopper mutters to himself, again. His head swivels to look at me. "You could get seriously hurt, Veronica. And then that'll be on my conscious."

"Hopper, no offense, but I just spent the past four days battling death. What's a little more danger?"

He looks back at the road ahead, gruffly, and as we drive into the woods I try not to panic, not to remember what they looked like in the Upside Down. "You being gone scared the shit out of a lot of people, Veronica." He finally says. "Me included."

I blink owlishly. I've interacted with Hopper a lot, over the years. Ever since he came back to Hawkins. He came back the same year my dad had his affair. I was in a bad place. Not just because of the depression and anxiety. I was so angry. And one night I just snapped, and ran off during dinner because Dustin kept asking when dad was coming home, and mom could barely hold it together.

I didn't get far, though. He was on patrol when he caught me halfway to the woods, walking in the middle of the road. I'd never seen an adult more pissed off than him, and he didn't even talk to me. He practically dragged me into his car and booked it to my house. We got back, and my mom was sobbing, rocking my brother back and forth as he cried, too.

He sat me down at the kitchen table and asked my mom to take my brother outside, so we could chat in private. And the whole time we spoke, he didn't raise his voice. Not once. He didn't give me looks of pity, either, which I hate. He only told me, *"Your old man is a dick. I would know, we were in the same class. What he did was awful, and disgusting. It's okay to get angry, to want to walk away when the rage builds. But you don't walk out the door in the middle of the night, that ain't smart or safe. You go to your room, you close the door, and you*

*scream into your pillow. You ask to be left alone for a few minutes. What if you got hit by a car? What if someone took you? What if you got lost? You've gotta be smart, hooligan. And you gotta be safe."*

I smile as I remember his words, remember the way he held my shoulder. How he checked in on me whenever he saw me around town. When he was at the range and saw me shooting my arrows, and called me "Robin Hood" for the first time.

"I'm sorry I scared you. I tried to be smart and safe down there."

Without losing focus on the path ahead, he pats my shoulder. "I know you did. That doesn't mean I like you doing this."

"I know. Sorry." I mutter.

"Shut up." He grunts, and I close my mouth. "You're a good kid, Veronica. You've done good. I know it ain't been easy."

That's all that has to be said, between us. We drive the rest of the way in a comfortable silence, until we notice two cars parked in the Junkyard, a way's ahead. "Shit."

"Amen." I agree with Hopper, and we park a safe distance away. He looks at me as he loads his weapon.

"Stay low, stay smart, stay safe."

I nod at his words and we get out, silently closing our doors. I creep after him, quiver slung over my back and bow in hand, lightly stepping over roots as though they're alive, and as panicked as I am out here in the woods, the urge to save my brother takes over.

I watch carefully as Hopper quietly subdues one suited man, the other delving too far into the woods. There's another walking straight towards the school bus parked in the middle, gun drawn.

Oh, hell no.

I creep out from behind my hiding spot and walk behind him, stepping in the same spots he had, just like I would when I'd go hunting with dad.

Just as the man is opening the door, I tap him on the shoulder. He turns in confusion, but before he can lift his weapon I grasp my bow with my other hand, twisting it so I hit him on the head, as hard as I can. He crumples over with the blow, the other side of his head bumping into the door. He collapses, out cold.

The remaining man wasn't as far as I thought he was, though, and he comes barrelling towards me, gun up. In defense, I notch an arrow and shoot it at his shoulder, just as Hopper comes out and bops him on the head. The suit falls to the ground with a pained yelp and a grunt.

As soon as I board the bus, three bodies latch onto me. I can't really make out anything they're saying. "Hey, hey. I'm okay. We gotta go. C'mon. Where's El?" I ask.

"You know her name?" Mike asks, and I point to Dustin.

"Here. I'm here." A soft voice answers, and I let go of the three boys, pushing them towards Hopper. Eleven is standing there in a pink dress and blue jacket, both a little too big for her. "Veronica." She whispers, again.

I blink. "I never told you my -"

"Dustin." She points to my brother, and I nod.

"Right." I hold my arms open. "Come here." I'm not sure if she's going to accept it, but the little girl tentatively comes over to me, stepping into my arms. "We're gonna get you somewhere safe." I turn to look back at the three boys. "All of you."

"Come on, we gotta go." Hopper gruffs out. "Let's go!" He orders, when no one listens. We all follow him, El still holding onto me. I wince when a jolt of pain shivers up my ankle when I step off the bus.

"Hurt?" She asks, and I nod.

"Yeah, El. Hurt."

"You?" She points to the goon with the arrow in his arm. I nod and



quietly shuffle us closer to the boys.

"Yeah, me."

"Dustin said you saw the bad man. Saw papa."

"Dr. Brenner?" I whisper. She nods. "Yeah. I kneed him."

"Need him?"

"No, no. Not need. *Kneed*. Hit him in the dick, with my knee. Uh, his balls. Um. I kicked him here." I gesture to my crotch, and she nods.

"Dick."

"Shit. Don't say either one of those words." I tell her.

The boys are already sitting in the backseat when we get to the car. "Get in with them." She nods and the boys make room, grumbling but making sure she's in. I catch Mike holding onto her as I close the door, and I smile to myself before getting in the car. Hopper starts the engine and we're peeling out, just as the sun is starting to set.

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It's dark by the time we get back to the Byers house. The minute Hopper cuts the engine the kids are leaping out of the car. Joyce comes out of the house first, followed by Jonathan and Nancy. But it's the latter who has the biggest reaction.

"Mike, oh my God, Mike!" She shouts, and even when she's hugging him, she's terrified. I walk past her to hug Joyce and Jonathan, bow still in hand and quiver still on my back. "I was so worried about you." Nancy pulls back, but her hands are still on his shoulders.

For his part, Mike just looks confused. "Yeah, uh... me too?"

I snort at his awkwardness, then step away from the my best friend and his mom to hold out my arms for Dustin and Lucas. Both boys accept the affection, rushing over to me and tripping over themselves. "Erica would have killed you if she lost her favorite sitter." Lucas tells me, and a terrifying image of a 9-year-old sassy Erica Sinclair beating me up with one of her dolls has me shivering.

"Oh, God, now I'm really glad I came back."

"You didn't come back for me?" Dustin asks, and while I know he's teasing, I have to say it.

"D, I'm always coming back for you." He sniffs and tries to act tough, but even Lucas - the dude who acts more like a 17-year-old than a 12-year-old - looks emotional.

"Is that my dress?" Nancy's question grabs our attention, and I notice just how awkward El looks.

"We should go inside." Joyce suggests. Hopper nods, and our small gathering shuffles into the Byers house, Hopper looking up behind us.

We all take a seat in the living room, gathering around the coffee table. I sit at Joyce's feet. "Okay, can someone please explain this 'Upside Down' shit to me?" Hopper asks.

"Yeah. But it makes more sense visually. Can someone get me some paper and a pen?" Mike asks.

Jonathan nods and disappears into his room, coming back with a yellow notepad and red marker. Mike takes it and rips off a page, and I watch him draw a line, a person, and a tiny blob with an arrow curving under the line. He holds it up to us. "Okay, so in this example, we're the acrobat on the tightrope." Mike uses the marker to point to the person on the line. "This flea," he points to the tiny blob next to the curved arrow, "is Barb, Will, that monster, and was Veronica."

"Oh, that's nice, I'm a flea." I mutter, and Nancy gives me a small snort.

Mike just keeps talking, ignoring me. "And this is the Upside Down, where Will is hiding." He points to the blank space under the line. Mr. Clarke said the only way to get there is through a rip of time and space."

"The goo." I realize, looking around the room, then settling on Jonathan and Nancy. "It was all over me when I woke up in the Upside Down. And we had to break through it to get back out, when

we went through that tree. But it closed, so there's no way back in." I remember.

"A gate." My brother speaks up, and I nod at him.

"That we tracked to Hawkins Lab." Lucas adds.

"With our compasses." My brother finishes. The boys stare at us, before realizing we don't get what they're trying to tell us. "Okay, so the gate has a really strong electromagnetic field, and that can change the direction of a compass needle." Dustin explains, and I honestly start to get misty-eyed.

"Damn, you're so smart." I tell him, and then I glance at the other two boys. "All of you."

Lucas blushes a bit, and Mike looks pleased with himself. My brother is just as teary as me, but doesn't say anything about it.

"Is this gate underground?" Hopper asks from his chair.

"Yes." We all look at Eleven.

"Near a large water tank?" He asks the little girl.

She nods. "Yes."

"H-how do you know all that?" Dustin asks the Chief.

"He's seen it." Mike pieces together. Hopper doesn't say anything, so I assume that means the kid was right.

Joyce clears her throat. "Is there anyway that you could..." El looks away from Hopper, breaking their staring contest, "that you could reach Will? That you could take to him in this -"

"Upside Down." I gently remind her, squeezing the woman's hand.

"Yeah. Upside Down."

El nods.

"And our friend Barbara," I look up at Nancy, who leans over to hold

my shoulder, "can you find her too?" El nods.

"Okay." I get up. "What do we need in order to do this?"

"White noise and a blindfold." Mike tells me, and I hold out my hand to help El stand up. We walk to the table and I take a seat next to her. Jonathan returns from his room with a bandana and a ripped up photo of Barb and I on the diving board. I look up at him, confused, but my best friend refuses to look at me, his cheeks stained red. I notice Nancy's cheeks are, too, but decide not to push. After getting a good look at Barb, El gestures to her head. I cover her eyes with the folded bandana, making sure it's not too tight. Mike sets the walkie on static and places it next to her, and we stay silent.

I watch as her hands clench and her body shakes, more patient than I've ever been in my whole life, which is saying something because I'm not known for being *impatient*, anyway.

We watch as the light flickers, then El rips off the bandana, tears in her eyes. "I'm sorry." She whispers to Joyce.

"Wh-what? What's wrong? Wh-what happened?" Joyce stammers out.

"I can't find them." Her voice breaks and she stands up, rushing away. I notice she's headed for the bathroom and follow her before anyone can stop me.

With my hands in my pocket I enter the small bathroom, El splashing her face with cold water. "Hey, El." She looks over at me and whimpers.

"I-I'm sorry. I wanted to help." She looks down mournfully and I come over to her, wrapping her in a hug. After a few moments she accepts it. "You helped me. I can't help you." She tells me, voice even softer than usual.

"El, shh. It's okay." I comfort her, and in the back of my mind I'm hearing Barb's screams. They fade when El starts to sob quietly, and I hold her even closer. "Hey. This is not your fault."

"I-I opened the gate. My fault." She whimpers.

"Did you open it? Or was it the bad man's fault?" I ask, pulling away to look down at her, not much taller.

"Papa... papa made me." She admits, and I nod.

"See? This is not what you wanted. Okay?" She nods. "Good. We'll figure something out. Okay? We'll find them." I move to turn off the water, realizing the sink is still running. Before I can, El holds my hand, staring at the faucet. "El? What's wrong?"

She blinks up at me. "I know how to help." The girl brushes past me and leaves the bathroom, turning off the water. I stand there for a second, confused, then follow after her.

When we return to the kitchen, the group is talking amongst themselves. But the conversation gets interrupted when El says, "The bath."

"What?" Joyce asks, briefly looking at me. I shrug, just as lost as she is.

"I can find them." El states, her eyes flicking around the room. "In the bath."

"The bath?" Nancy asks, sitting up, intelligent eyes bursting with questions.

"Papa put me in the bath. So I could see it." El timidly explains, and Dustin snaps his fingers.

"Sensory deprivation!"

"But how do we do it?" Mike asks, and Lucas shrugs.

Suddenly Dustin grins. "Mr. Clarke." He rushes over to the phone, having memorized his favorite teacher's number last year. Seriously, he calls him a lot. Mr. Clarke's awesome, though. A really good teacher. Mom loves him for supporting Dustin and all his crazy experiments.

"Dustin, it's Saturday night, I don't think -"

"Leia, come on. He's our only hope." I raise an eyebrow at my little brother, but he ignores it. Instead he holds the phone to his ear and dials the number with his free hand, tapping the phone as he waits. And waits. And waits. Until, "Mr. Clarke? It's Dustin. Yeah, yeah, Veronica is okay. I just, I... I have a science question." Dustin shakes his head at himself, and I smile. "Do you know anything about sensory deprivation tanks?" He asks, words a little rushed. "Specifically how to build one?" He stops speaking for a moment, then says, "Fun." He turns to look at me, nervous, and I can tell Mr. Clarke is on the other end itching to hang up.

So I mouth "talk" to my little brother, and Dustin does what he does best.

"You always say we should never stop being curious. To always open any curiosity door we find. Why are you keeping this curiosity door locked?" He asks, and I give him a thumbs up, making an amused face, like I'm about to laugh. "Awesome. Okay, wait a sec -" Dustin rushes over to the table and sits at an empty seat, grabbing a pen and a pad of paper. He writes down whatever instructions Mr. Clarke is giving him, only interrupting a few times. "Uh-huh. How much? Uh-huh. Yep, alright, we'll be careful. Definitely. Alright, Mr. Clarke. Yeah, I'll see you on Monday, Mr. Clarke. Bye." He hangs up without so much as a thank you, ignoring the swat I deliver to the back of his head. He looks over at Joyce. "Do you still have that kiddie pool we bobbed for apples in?" He asks her.

"I think so, yeah. Yeah?" She asks Jonathan, who nods.

"Yeah."

"Good, then we just need salt. Lots of it."

"How much is 'lots'?" Hopper asks my little brother, who briefly glances down at his notepad.

"1,500 lbs."

"Well, where are we going to get that much salt?" Nancy asks.

Hopper looks at us, already a step ahead. "The middle school keeps

de-icing salt in their gym."

I clap my hands together. "I guess that's it, then. School's back in session."

Mike groans. "On a Saturday?"

I smile icily at him. "Well, we could always wait until Monday, if that works better for you."

He glares at me, but his cheeks are flushed which means he knows he lost the battle before it began.

---

We get to the school in separate cars. I ride in the front seat of Hopper's Chevy Blazer, Dustin and Lucas in the backseat. El and Mike ride with Nancy, Jonathan, and Joyce. Mike is the most eager to get out when all is said, most likely feeling overwhelmed by all the attention Nancy is giving him. It's nice, though. I missed a lot, when I was gone. And Nancy and I were good friends, but we weren't like we've been since she got me out of the Upside Down. Maybe it's because my walls were torn up by the monsters, and maybe it's because she lost two people she cares about and got less... prissy?..., but things are different. When I look at her, I feel like maybe I'll get a sister out of all this.

As soon as we get out, Hopper orders us around, ever the leader. Dustin and Lucas are given the inflatable pool, charged with setting it up in the gym. Mike and Nancy are sent to grab hoses to fill it up. Jonathan helps Hopper get the ice, and I follow Joyce and El into my old middle school to get her ready.

We sit in the science room, El's tiny body on my lap as Joyce grabs a pair of goggles and duct tapes the lenses to block out light. My bow and quiver of arrows are resting on the desk beside us. "Alright. This will keep it dark for you. Just like in your bathtub." She hands the goggles over to the girl, giving her a soft smile, one usually reserved for Will when he draws something for her.

Will's a really good artist. There's this arrow he drew me, inside this elaborate snowflake. I want it tattooed on me at some point.

"You're a very brave girl." She continues. "You know that, don't you?" El looks away, but Joyce only keeps talking in that persisting motherly way of hers. "Everything you're doing for my boy... for Will... for Barb, for my family..." Joyce takes my hand in hers without looking away from the little girl in my lap. She sighs and sniffs. "Thank you." She takes one of El's hands in her free one. "Listen. I am gonna be there with you the whole time."

"Me too, kiddo." El looks back at me briefly, giving me a small nod before returning her gaze to Joyce.

"And if it ever gets too scary... i-in that place, you just let us know, okay?"

El nods, then says, "Yes." It's as soft as when I was taking care of her cuts in the basement of the Wheeler house, when everything was strange to her.

This poor girl. This poor, brave girl.

It's not pity that's making me affectionate towards her, or even protective of her. Like I said before, pity is the worst. Pity does not breed affection, compassion does.

"Ready?" Joyce asks.

El nods, and lets out a breath. "Ready."

We all stand up and walk out the door of the science room, my arm around El's shoulders and weapon on my back. "I'm sorry you were stuck with the boys." I finally murmur, noticing how nervous she is. Like Barb would get... will get... before a test.

"Wasn't bad." She whispers.

"No fighting?" I ask. "Was Dustin nice?"

"Dustin was nice. Called me his friend." I smile with pride at her words, wondering how I could have ever doubted my little brother, no matter how brief. I mean, yeah, he lacks a filter and tact, but he's a great kid. Mom and I have made sure he is.



"Mike?"

"Took care of me." She blushes a little, and I wink at Joyce, who is staring at us with a soft expression.

"Lucas?"

"We fought. He didn't trust me."

I frown a little. "I'm sorry. Lucas is just... he's very protective. Cautious." She gives me a confused look. "Careful. He... uh... he doesn't rush into things. He takes his time and wants to keep his friends safe. But you two are better now?"

"Yes. I... apologized?... for throwing him. He said sorry, too. Friends don't lie." She finishes, and while I want to ask about the "throwing" incident I feel like that's a story for another, less pressing time.

We get into the gym, the rest of our group is patiently waiting for us. Mike's turned the walkie back on, setting it to static. I steady El as she removes her jacket and socks, handing the Wheeler boy his watch. He carefully puts it on his wrist, then helps me remove my bow and arrows, setting them down beside the pool.

Joyce hands El the goggles and she puts it on, taking a deep breath. Between Joyce and I, we're able to get her carefully into the pool. She settles in the water, floating on her back, and we sit around her. I'm in between Hopper and Joyce, the former patting my shoulder when he sees me rolling out my ankle. I wince a little at the soreness, but honestly if I ignore the pain long enough it goes away.

The electricity begins to surge, the lights getting bright before shutting off once more. We're all completely silent as El keeps floating, waiting for her to find the missing. She suddenly begins breathing heavily, the electricity pulsing once more. I know panic better than most. Hell, it's practically my best friend.

"What's going on?" Nancy asks Mike, who looks scared, too.

"I don't know."

"Is Barb okay?" I ask El, trying not to show how absolutely terrified I

am.

"Is she okay?" Nancy asks once more, when El doesn't answer.

The word she yells out a second later will haunt me for the rest of my life.

Splashing in the water, El yells, "Gone! Gone!"

Gone. Gone. Barb is gone. Gone. Gone.

*I can hear her screaming, feel her sweaty hands in mine as I hold on. I can hear her screaming for me, for Nancy, for anyone. I can feel her getting tugged away from me, yelling at me to Go, Smarties, go!*

*I don't know what's happening. I can't see anything, I can't breathe. I don't know where I really am. Half of me sees the gym, the other sees the empty pool, feels the vines.*

*My fault, my fault, my fault. It's my fault. Should have died, should have died. Should have died. Should have saved Barb. Should have tried harder, why didn't I try harder?*

"Veronica!" Someone roars, and I open my eyes to see Hopper sitting in front of me. My knees are up and I'm rocking back and forth violently, my hands covering my ears. Someone is screaming. Who's screaming. "Veronica!" Hopper shouts once more, and the screams get louder. "Hey, come on. Breathe, Veronica. Breathe!" He orders.

I try, I really do, but I can't. I can't do anything but lose it.

"Leia." My eyes flick over, vaguely making out Dustin as he crawls over to me. "Leia, please. Please. You're scaring me."

*Scaring him. I'm scaring him. Can't do anything right. Who's screaming? Why is it so loud?*

"Leia, please. Come back to me."

"Veronica!" Joyce yells, one arm wrapped around a scared little girl, the other reaching out to me. "You promised El! You promised! Come on, dear, snap out of it! You need to breathe. Breathe, Veronica,

breathe."

I keep rocking, ears covered. I feel like I'm being strangled by vines, ripped apart by sharp claws, bit at with pointed teeth.

"Leia, please. Please come back to me." Dustin pleads. I look into his wide blue eyes, see the fear. My throat is throbbing, and the screams have stopped. Was I screaming? "That's it, c'mon sis. I'm so sorry. I'm so, so sorry. I know I shouldn't be asking you to do anything but break down, but right now I need my older sister. I promise, the minute this is over, I'll hold you while you break down. But I need you, milady. Please. Please don't leave me."

I nod and move my hands, rocking subsiding. I can make out Nancy's mournful face, and I feel so guilty. So, so guilty. I couldn't save her best friend.

Before I can panic more, the blue-eyed girl is crawling over to me, arms wrapped around my shaking body. "It's not your fault. Come back to us." I nod into her neck, then move away from her to hold Dustin.

"Sorry." I croak out, and he holds me tighter. "Not gonna leave you." After a few seconds, he lets go of me, and I stare at El, her goggles off and big brown eyes full of tears. "El, I'm so sorry. I promised. I'm so sorry." I reach for her and she pulls away from Joyce, her wet dress soaking my top as we hug.

"Sorry. Sorry. Wanted to help." El whimpers.

"Oh, El, you did. You did so good. I'm sorry I wasn't strong. Are you okay?" I ask, wiping away her tears as I look at her. She nods.

"Okay. Joyce helped."

"I'm sorry I couldn't." I apologize, still not breathing quite right.

"Saved me." She reminds me of that first night, when we found her in the rain. "Already helped."

I nod. "Okay, sweetheart. Okay."

"Go... again." She tells Joyce, putting her goggles back on.

"Okay. Okay, honey. I got you. We got you." She nods at me and we help El lie back down, one of her hands in ours. The lights flicker again, and she breathes. I try to match hers, Dustin wrapped around my back like a koala in a form of comfort, Nancy leaning her forehead on my shoulder while Jonathan watches us with a soft, mournful expression.

"Don't be afraid. We're right here with you." Joyce tells El, and we watch her nod her head.

"I'm not going to break my promise again, sweetheart." I whisper, holding her hand a little tighter. She squeezes back, just enough for me to know she's listening.

"Castle Byers. Castle Byers." My eyes flick over to Joyce, then to Jonathan. Castle Byers, Will's little hideout in the forest. Jonathan and him built in the rain, the night Lonnie and Joyce got divorced. I remember it so well because I came over the next day when they were sick and made soup, since Joyce had to go into work. I caught their cold and bitched about it to Jonathan for a week, but also spent that time telling Will it wasn't his fault.

So wherever El is now, she sees Castle Byers.

Please be there, Will. Please.

"Will?" I gasp, eyes tearing some more as I look at Jonathan, his hand covering his mouth.

"You tell him... tell him I'm coming. Mom is coming." Joyce shakily requests.

"Your mom, sh-she's coming for you." El says, stuttering a bit.

"Hurry." We hear on the radio, and I smile a little. *Will. It's Will.*

"Okay. Listen, you tell him to... t-to stay where he is. We're coming, okay? We're coming for you, honey." Joyce stutters out.

"Just... hold on a l-little longer." El says. "Will. Will." Her voice

becomes distressed. "Will? Will!" We can hear her whimpering over the radio, and Lucas and Mike jump back when she abruptly sits up, tearing the goggles off her face.

Joyce and I burst forward to hold the whimpering girl. "Okay, okay, we've got you." Joyce murmurs.

El holds onto us, breathing heavily, and gives me the smallest of smiles. "Helped?"

"Sweetheart, you did so good." I repeat the words my mom tells me everytime I bring home a good grade, or show off my archery skills, or even just help Dustin with something. She nods. "When this is over, I'll give you whatever you want."

"Eggos? Like Eggos." She whispers. I nod tearfully, my ears still ringing with Barb's screams but my heart full of hope in getting Will back.

"You can have all the Eggos. I promise." I whisper. Hopper stands and helps the shivering girl out of the water, and the boys rush to help her over to the bleachers. Lucas, who had a towel on standby because that boy is always prepared, wraps it around her while she leans on Mike's shoulders and rubs her arms to warm her. I never saw the animosity between them, but looking at the pair now, how protective and caring he is of El, it's impossible for me to picture Lucas not being her friend. These kids. My brother and his Party, they're... God, they're the best.

I wipe away a tear, and feel thin arms wrapping around me, holding me close with a strength I never thought they possessed. "I've got you, Vera." Nancy whispers. I nod, curling into her a bit while Hopper asks for directions to Castle Byers.

"It's in the woods behind our house." Joyce tells him.

"Yeah, he used to go there, to hide." Jonathan tells the Chief.

Hopper starts to walk away, only to stop in front of me. Nancy reluctantly lets go, only for me to be brought into a warm hug, Hopper holding me close, as if he could protect me from what's going

on in my head. "You, stay smart."

"Stay safe." I whisper. He pulls away to give me a nod, then continues walking out the door. Joyce and Jonathan hurry after him, and Nancy wraps her arms around me again.

"Come with me. Come on, Vera." She whispers. I nod and let her lead me out of the gym, sliding down wall with a tiger cub's head painted over the American flag. I lean my head on her shoulder, her head bowed down on my own, and she's pulled my legs over hers. We both start to cry, terrible loud sobs for the friend we lost, for the girl I couldn't save. I try to say as much, but Nancy only holds me closer.

"Barb was not your fault. Okay?" I know she knows that I don't really believe her, but she pretends like I do, and I try to pretend, too.

"Okay."

Our sobs are sniffles now. "You know, one of the last things she said to me was that she was proud to be my friend. And I made her promise to buy me a milkshake."

"Strawberry, right?" Nancy remembers, and I nod. "I'm sorry it took all of this, to get us... close. Closer. Best friends?"

I remove my head from her shoulder so blue eyes meet green. "Me, too. I know I didn't make it easy. I probably won't after everything that's happened. But, if you can be patient with me, and stubborn... I'll try not to push you away or hide behind walls."

She nods, smiling wetly. "Okay. But don't lose your 'Ice Queen' abilities."

"And risk letting the assholes at school be bigger, unchecked assholes? Hell no." She giggles, and I put my head back on her shoulder. "And we're not best friends. We're sisters. You saved me, Nance. I would have died if you didn't find me."

"It was luck." She whispers.

"Yeah, well that luck found me. But it was you that dragged me out of there."

"Well, I wasn't about to lose you. Who else is going to keep teaching me how to drink?"

I giggle, until it builds into something hysterical. We quiet down a bit, after a few moments, still sniffing.

Jonathan comes around the corner, then, and walks over to us. He sits next to Nancy, blushing a bit, but then straightens my leg to carefully rub my left ankle. "We have to go back to the station." Nancy calmly announces, after a few moments of silence.

"What?" Jonathan asks, and I nod into Nancy's shoulder.

"John, Hopper, and... your mom..." I know Joyce has gone with him, because she's stubborn like that. "They're walking into a trap. They don't know the Upside Down, not like I do. They don't know the monster like I do, either."

Nancy nudges the top of her head against mine, in agreement. "We can't just sit around and let the monster get them, too. We can't."

Jonathan breathes, but it isn't the resigned one he gets when I convince him to do something involving getting out of his comfort zone. "You still want to try it out?"

"I want to finish what we started."

"Let's kill this son of a bitch." Nancy and I say at the same time, looking over at Jonathan. He nods, then stands up and holds out his hands to help us. "Good. I was worried I'd have to go by myself."

Despite everything I still snort, stabilizing myself when I'm no longer on my ass and instead on two feet. "You're going to kill a beast without me? I'm the damn Huntress." I remind him, pulling out my knife and wiggling my eyebrows. Jonathan rolls his eyes and gives me a hug. No words are needed to be said, so the three of us walk into the gym together.

When Dustin sees me slinging my quiver over my body and holding onto my bow, he rushes over to me. "Where the hell are you three going?" He panics.

"Listen, D." I murmur, cupping his round face in my hands. "Hopper and Joyce need us. We're going to kill that thing."

"The Demogorgon." He tells me. "We're calling it the Demogorgon."

"Okay." I nod, going along with it. "The Demogorgon. We're going to kill it. And then I'm coming back, okay? So you four have to work together until then, okay?" He nods, and I hand him my knife. "If the bad men come, stick 'em with the pointy end."

"I'm not sure you should be telling me to be violent." Dustin delicately takes the blade from my hands.

I shrug. "Yeah, well, I don't want my brother to get killed, so I'm letting it slide." I kiss his forehead and walk over to the kids, Mike hugging his sister. "You four, work together. You're strongest when you're together. Capiche?"

"Capiche." El says, the others nodding. I smile and crouch down so I'm on her level.

"Don't let them give you any shit."

"No shit." She repeats.

I give her a hug. "I thought I said not to use that word?" She just shrugs.

Lucas and Mike get one, too, the latter way more affectionate than usual.

Just as Jonathan, Nancy and I are walking away, I hear Dustin yell, "Hey. You said this morning I saved you. How?"

I turn around to look at him. "You gave me the Three Musketeers bar, when we were fighting. It kept me from completely starving. And... and I saw you. When you were little. Remember the Chewbacca costume?" He blushes, but surprisingly neither Mike nor Lucas make fun of me. "You reminded me of something I promised you."

"What's that?"



"That I'd never leave you. So I'm coming back."

He nods, body relaxing. I give him one last smile, then square my shoulders, following Jonathan and Nancy out of the middle school.

---

Jonathan carefully parks his mom's car outside the station, and we all let out a sigh of relief when we see there aren't any officers lingering outside. Thank God for budget cuts and understaffing, am I right?

So, you can imagine sneaking into the darkened station is relatively easy. There's only one officer, and his desk is facing away from us. Which means that as long as we're silent, we'll be in and out.

Nancy, I'm discovering, is full of surprises. She literally pulls a paper clip out of nowhere, bends it to her specifications, and unlocks Hopper's office door. Jonathan and I both exchange impressed looks, mine reading more like, "If you don't marry this girl we're no longer family."

He gets the message, it seems, because his eye roll is the most dramatic one I've experienced yet. He grabs the box, though, tossing me the keys. We sneak back out into the hall, making sure to lock up the door from the inside.

I creep through, first, peering into the main office. The night officer still has back to us, and there's still no one outside, so we go out and walk around to behind the station. I do a double take when I see Nancy holding a large fire extinguisher, but then shrug in favor of unlocking the trunk. The box joins the gas tank, and I drop in my bow and quiver.

"Let's go hunt us a Demogorgon." I tell my companions, then slam the trunk closed.

## 6. The Upside Down

Hi all, and welcome to my *Stranger Things* Steve Harrington/OC story! It's been a long, long time coming. Seriously. Since 2017 long.

I just updated the first chapter, so this is a little different than the original I posted. In this story, we've got the Ice Queen of Hawkins, the older-but-shorter-by-season 2 sister of Dustin Henderson, because he deserves an older sibling. She's Veronica, and even though *Heathers* came out in 1989 I've taken the liberty of borrowing some of my favorite quotes because Winona Ryder Easter Eggs. Seriously, I cannot overstate my love for that movie. Anyway, there's more of a backstory for the Henderson family, including adding the dad to the "asshole fathers club", co-president with Lonnie Byers, the prick. Expect explicit language because, hello, *Stranger Things* isn't known for censoring language.

Fair warning, while this is Steve/OC the season 2 part will include Billy/OC, but not for long. I promise. He's a great villain, but he's a dick until he isn't. Just wanted to get that out of the way. Because again, he's a dick. But I'm also treating their relationship a bit like Jackson Whittemore and Lydia Martin's from *Teen Wolf*, especially with the later outcome. And there will also be inbetween chapters between ST 1 and ST 2, then ST 2 and ST 3, adding some more things as well as a deeper dive into how Max and Billy's relationship changes, because let's be honest that wasn't really commented on in ST 3, and I'd like to see it. But this will not be a Billy Hargrove/OC endgame story. Not like that.

It's here! This is the 1x08 chapter (most of it, at least). As this story is going to be expanded to include extra scenes between each "season", the actual ending for 1x08 has been moved to a later update. I pull a Duffer brothers and get my girl all bloody, like they do to Steve EVERY SINGLE FINALE, JESUS, GIVE HIM A BREAK! She's a fighter, though, but Veronica will definitely need therapy when this is over. We see her being a badass archer that

would make Allison Argent proud. She and Nancy have more cute best friend/sister moments, and she finds out about Jonathan and his pictures, which was a little fun to write. There's cute Steve/Veronica exchanges, too. Oh, and we see Erica Sinclair here! The kids prove they are really her kids, so that's cute, too. This chapter ends more bitter than sweet.

The next update will include a visit with Hawkins Lab representatives as well as Veronica physically recovering. Obviously they know she spent time in the Upside Down, so we're also going to see her doing a couple of check ups to make sure there are no lasting affects, other than a lot of PTSD. Yeah, that's coming full force. Shit is about to get real, but I'm doing what the Riverdale writers never will and getting her more therapy. Veronica is going to have a rough road ahead until I write for the second "season", but the good new

Enjoy the story! I only own Veronica.

---

As soon as Jonathan parks, I'm shooting out of the car and limping into the house, taking stock of the mess. My partners follow me in, Nancy carrying the tank and the extinguisher, Jonathan holding the box. They set both down on the ground and look at me. "What do we do?" Nancy asks. "How do we -"

"Kill the Demogorgon?" I finish, biting my lip. "We treat it like any other intelligent predator. This thing moves fast, comes literally out of nowhere." I look up at the Christmas lights around the house, multiple bulbs missing. "The kids said the gate has a strong electromagnetic field. In the car, you said your mom was using the Christmas lights to talk to Will?" Jonathan nods and I start to pace around the cluttered living room, biting at the skin around my thumb in thought. "Ok, so, we know the monster can create rifts, too. Which will affect the electricity. I don't know how I feel about setting up extra traps, since it's too closed in here, but if we change some lightbulbs in those strings -"

"That can be our alarm system." Nancy finishes.

Jonathan nods. "Okay. I'll grab the extra bulbs."

"We'll need a hammer, too." I crouch down to inspect the bear trap, biting my lip.

"Got it!" He shouts back, going through his house. Nancy and I unpack the box, laying out some ammo, the nails, the lighter fluid, and a baseball bat. Jonathan returns with the items I sent him to look for.

The three of us go around the rooms, replacing bulbs and pushing boxes and scattered papers out of the way so no one trips in the inevitable fight with the Demogorgon.

I limp over to the narrow hallway, gingerly carrying the bear trap. Jonathan and Nancy follow me, sitting to the side and observing as I figure out the perfect spot for the fanged trap.

Nancy slides over a box of nails and I position them in the hole for the chain. Jonathan silently hands me the hammer, and the only sounds you can hear are metal-meeting-metal and our breathing. While I'm working, Nancy gets up and begins to pour out the gasoline, creating a trail to help light up the sucker when it gets caught.

When I'm done securing the trap, Jonathan helps me open it, his foot pressed against the bridge end as I carefully pull the teeth apart. Nancy helps me stand, handing me a yoyo and an extra-long string. I attach it to the trap and carefully walk it into Will's room, trying to make sure it's not in the way of our legs when we're running. Placing the yoyo end over the chair in his room, I double-check the signal is secure before returning to my partners. "You guys have weapons, right?" I ask.

They look at each other and grin, walking away. I just roll my eyes and limp after them to sit at the kitchen table and inspect my arrowheads and bow. I make sure the string is tightened and the small gears on the compact weapon move with ease. Something clicks behind me and I briefly turn my head to see Nancy holding a revolver, loading it with bullets and clicking it into place. Jonathan is banging something with his hammer, and I look over the table to observe him sticking the long nails into his bat like it's some medieval weapon, the coffee table shaking while he uses the

mahogany as a workbench.

My focus returns to the arrowheads in front of me, and I reach into my pocket to grab my knife. I panic for a second when I don't find it, before remembering I lent it to Dustin. God, I really hope that doesn't backfire. If I don't die fighting the monster, my mom will finish the job.

I get up and cross over to one of the drawers, pulling out the sharpest knife I can find before sitting back down. I sharpened a few earlier, when I was with Hopper, but there's still a couple that are too dull for my taste, and I don't want to be unprepared when this thing comes.

As metal scrapes against metal, Nancy sits next to me, watching. "I didn't know you did archery." I stop sharpening for a second to glance up at her, a little confused. "I mean, not like how you really do. I, uh, I thought it was just a hobby."

"Why are we talking about archery?" I ask, not unkindly, and she blushes.

"Sorry, I'm nervous. And..."

"And archery seemed like a safe subject." She nods, still a little embarrassed, but I smile at her, walls down for the moment. "It's okay. Honestly. I'm terrified, too. We're in this together." I go back to the task at hand. "I started when I was a kid. Eight. *The Merry Adventures of Robin Hood* was my favorite book. My dad would read it to me all the time. He did teach my how to use a gun, but... I liked the idea of running through the woods with a bow way more adventurous. Even when he left, I couldn't really give it up."

"When this is all over, do you want to have a competition? See who the better marksman is?"

I grin at her competitive-yet-friendly smirk. "Sure. But you're going to end up owing me a bunch of strawberry milkshakes."

Both of our smiles turn sad, but she takes my elbow comfortingly. "Actually, you're going to be the one owing me milkshakes. I prefer chocolate."

I bite my lip and set down my sharp arrows. "Oh. Is that how it's gonna go?"

"Oh, you know it is."

We look at each other, then burst into laughter. That gets the attention of Jonathan, who walks over to us in confusion.

"What's going on?"

"Nunya business, Johnny." I tell him, wiping away hysterical tears. "Is everything ready?"

He sighs, looking down nervously. "Yeah. As much as it can be, at least."

I nod and stand, placing my arrows back in the quiver and pulling it over my body, tightening the diagonal strap. I hold onto my bow, too, and watch as Jonathan riffles through the draw of utensils. I hold up my chef's knife, so he just grabs two. We walk into the living room, staring at each other in a small clump.

"Remember," I breathe out, "We go straight into Will's room, and -"

"And avoid the trap." Nancy nods, voice shaky.

We look at Jonathan, who breathes in. "We wait for the yoyo to move. Then," he opens the zippo in his hand and flicks it open.

Then we burn the son of a bitch.

"Okay. We've got a plan. A good one. Even if the plan goes south, we stay and we fight." I order, and they nod in agreement.

"You ready?" Jonathan asks us, holding his knife to his hand. I set my bow between my legs and hold out my right hand, my left holding the knife to my open palm. It'd be a bitch of a thing if I had to hold my weapon with a cut hand and worry about accuracy. At least when I pull the string, all I need are my fingers.

"Ready." Nancy agrees, right hand holding her knife against her left palm, Jonathan doing the same. I'm the odd one out by not matching

them, but I don't mind.

I realize I haven't said anything when Jonathan clears his throat. "Jesus Christ, let's just do this shit."

Nancy snorts, and Jonathan rolls his eyes. "Alright, okay. On the count of three."

"One..." Nancy says.

"Two..." Jonathan follows, and I suck in some air, cool blade to my skin.

"Three." I breathe out, and we slice our palms together, wincing and groaning at the sharp pain as some blood drips to the floor.

Now all we have to do is wait.

---

Jonathan finishes wrapping some gauze around my hand, having cleaned the cut a bit. I did the same for Nancy, who helped him. Thankfully none of us cut too deep, and while the wounds are still bleeding we don't look like we belong in a slasher flick.

I sit on the couch beside Jonathan, who's inspecting Nancy's wrapped hand. "Hey." They look at me. "I, uh, I wanted to ask... how did you guys even get those photos?"

"That's your main concern right now?" Jonathan asks, looking away, but his cheeks are red and his eyes are full of embarrassment, which means he's guilty of something.

I let my expression morph into something cold. "What. Did. You. Do?"

"Uh -"

"He took pictures of us when we were at Steve's." Nancy rushes out, then closes her mouth and stares apologetically at Jonathan.

"I'm sorry, I think I misheard her. Did Nancy just say you took pictures of us. Without our consent?"

"I was in the woods, looking for Will, and -"

I point at him, leaning forward with incredulous confusion on my face. "Uh-uh, no. Not a good excuse. Did you apologize?"

"Well, I -"

"He did!" Nancy interrupts. "He did, it's okay."

I breathe out, but am still glaring at my best friend. "Dude, that's so creepy. An-and wrong. You know better." He huffs and nods. "I'm disappointed in you. God, that's gross."

"I know." He murmurs, voice all soft with sincere apology. "I shouldn't have done it. I know I shouldn't have. If it's any consolation, I won't be taking pictures of anything, anytime soon."

"What do you mean?" I ask, a little less angry at Jonathan for the sake of wanting to move on.

He shrugs. "Steve broke my camera."

I don't have the heart to tell my best friend I would have done the same thing if I caught that shit and I were in Harrington's position. But I do take his hand. "Hey. Maybe we can find one for you, after all this."

"Maybe." He shrugs.

There's a faint creaking noise that comes from outside, and it halts the conversation. Nancy tenses and I slowly take out an arrow, notching it without holding my bow up.

"Did you hear that?" Nancy asks.

"It's just the wind." Jonathan responds, after a few seconds of silence. "Don't worry." He softly says to Nancy, and I narrow my eyes with interest when the Wheeler girl blushes a little and looks down. "Remember, the lights will flicker when it's here." She nods, her left fingertips gently touching his. I feel a little left out, so I just fix my arrow. "Nancy?"



Oh my God, I'm the third wheel. Jesus christ.

"Yeah?"

Someone pounds on the door and I immediately stand, drawing my bow and shifting my weight onto my right leg. "Jonathan? Are you there, man? It-it's me, Steve!"

I lower my bow a little, looking down at my companions in shock.

"Steve?" We ask each other at the same time.

Harrington keeps knocking on the door. "Listen, I just want to talk!"

Before I can stop her, Nancy gets up and unlocks the door, but keeps it open three inches. "Steve, listen to me."

"Hey, Nancy." He interrupts, confused, "What -"

"You need to leave."

"I'm not trying to start anything, okay?"

"I don't care about that, you need to leave."

I nervously look down at Jonathan, who gets up and stands a little in front of me. "No, no, no." Steve stammers. "Listen, I messed up, okay? I messed... I messed up." I close my eyes. "Okay? Really. Please. I just want to make things right. Humility and perspective, like Roni said."

"Roni?" I open my eyes and mouth up at Jonathan, who shrugs in confusion.

"Okay? Please, please... Hey. What happened to your hand?" Steve asks, impossibly soft, and I wish it was directed at me. Because I can still feel how soft his touch was when he pressed his fingers to my bruised chin. "Is that blood?"

"Nothing. I-it was an accident."

"Yeah, what's going on?"

"Nothing." Nancy responds, short and to the point.

"Wait a sec, did he do this to you?"

"No!"

"Where's Roni? Is she okay?" He asks, forcing the door open. "Is Roni okay?" He asks again, stumbling through the door.

"Steve, stop!" Nancy cries out, but he's already in view, face bloodied and bruised from his fight with Jonathan. He looks around in shock before his eyes fall onto me, bow held up and arrow pointed at him before I realize what I'm doing.

"What is... what the... Roni, what are you doing?" He asks me, holding up his hands in surrender.

"You need to get out of here." Jonathan orders, coming up to the other guy and clenching his hand around the collar of his green sweatshirt.

"Whoa, what is all -"

"I'm not asking you, I'm telling you."

"Roni!" Steve shouts, but I keep my bow up.

"Steve, please. You have to get out of here." I gently order. He shakes his head, trying to shove past Jonathan to come over to me.

"What is that smell? Is... is that gasoline?"

Nancy steps around the newcomer, pulling out her revolver and copying my aim. "Steve! Get out!"

"Wait, wait, wait, what?!" He shouts, looking between us two girls. "What is going on?"

"You have five seconds to get out of here."

"Three!" I growl at her. "We don't have time for this!"

She nods without looking at me, but Steve keeps talking. "Okay, is this a joke? Stop! Put the gun and bow down." He pleads.

I shake my head. "Steven, please, go. This is for your own good." I tell him, but he ignores the chill for once and steps forward.

"Veronica, I -"

"Nancy, Ver." I hear Jonathan mumble, and briefly look at him. He points up, and I realize the lights are starting to flicker.

"Nancy."

"Nance." Jonathan and I try to get her attention, but she's too busy threatening Steve.

"Three... two..."

"Nancy!" Jonathan and I shout, and she stops counting, looking between the both of us.

"The lights." My best friend tells her.

"It's here." I tell her, stepping out of the way while Jonathan dives for his bat, straightening and getting ready to swing.

Steve's behind us, still panicking. "Wait, what's here?"

"Where is it?" Nancy asks, and Steve gets closer to us.

"Where is what? Whoa! Easy with those!" He shouts as Jonathan, Nancy and I stand back-to-back-to-back, spinning in a circle and aiming at nothing.

"I don't know, I don't see it!" Jonathan responds, and I draw my arrow, pointing it, well, anywhere and everywhere.

"Where is what? Hello, will someone please explain to me what the hell is going -"

The sound of wood breaking cuts Steve off, and I look up in horror to see the roof of the Byers house caving in, familiar pale arms sneaking through, followed with the closed flowerbud head.

I immediately shoot, smiling when it hits the creature in the

shoulder. I notch another arrow and hit the Demogorgon in the chest. It roars in pain but keeps going.

Nancy is beside me, shooting at it with her revolver, only to stop when Jonathan jumps forward to pull her back.

"Go! Go! Run! Go!" He shouts, but I refocus on the Demogorgon instead, images of Barbara laughing, smiling, screaming flashing through my mind.

"Come on. Come on!" I roar as it climbs down, a third arrow piercing it's ribcage.

The Demogorgon screeches and staggers towards me, but before I can draw another arrow strong hands are on my hips, tugging me away. My ankle throbs as Steve forces me ahead of him, despite his panicking, letting go.

"Jump!" Jonathan shouts, and we each leap over the bear trap.

"Oh my God, oh my God, oh my God!" Steve shouts, and as soon as he's in the room Nancy slams the door shut. "Jesus! Jesus! What the hell was that?" He screams.

"Shut up!" The three of us tell him. Nancy and I turn around, my arrow drawn and her gun reloaded. Jonathan joins us, zippo flicked open and nail bat held out.

We wait as the creature screeches in pain, loud thumps echoing through the narrow hall. But it goes silent too soon, the yoyo never moving. The lights stop flickering.

"What's it doing?" Nancy asks, and I feel her looking at me. "Has it ever done that -" I lower my bow and place a finger to my lips before slowly opening the door.

As soon as I'm in the hall, my arrow is notched and drawn to shoot straight ahead, but the monster is gone.

The others follow me out when I gesture for them to come, and without looking their way, I speak up. "It's licking its wounds." I whisper, then glance over at her and Jonathan. "This thing is smart.

It's gonna be back, though."

I stare ahead once more, dread building in my stomach. If three sharp arrows can't slow it down, what will?

---

After standing in the hall for a few minutes, the four of us silently walk back to the main part of the house. With the exception of Steve, we all have our weapons out at the ready, carefully inspecting every corner we can see. As we look around silently, Steve starts muttering to himself, getting louder and louder as freaks out. Which, understandable. *"This is crazy. This is crazy. This is crazy. This is crazy! This is crazy! This is crazy!"* He lunges for the phone and starts dialing, only for Nancy to rush over, snatch it, and throw it down. I can hear the phone break and wince, hoping we can just blame it on the Demogorgon to avoid Joyce's wrath.

"Are you insane?" He screams, obviously terrified out of his mind. Nancy just stares up at him.

"It's going to come back!" She shouts. "So you need to leave." He looks at her, still scared but a little calm. Then his eyes flick over her ponytail and land on me.

I nod. "It's okay, Steve. Go."

Relief flows through my veins when he tears out of the Byers house, slamming the door behind him as he goes. Nancy looks back at me, and I nod. No words need to be said when she rejoins us, three of us standing with our backs to each other, ready to fight.

The lights flicker, stronger than they did before. I can hear the electricity humming, building into a scream. We breathe heavily, slowly walking in a circle.

"Where is it?" Nancy asks.

I shake my head, narrowing my eyes as I try to see through the strobing lights, the house getting darker longer every time the lights flicker. "I don't know."

"Come on. Come on, you son of a bitch." Jonathan growls. "You see

it?"

"No!" Nancy responds, all of our breaths getting shorter.

"Where are you?" I whisper.

At the same time, Jonathan yells, "Come on!"

Suddenly Nancy yells, and I turn my head to see the Demogorgon coming after her, roaring. I push her out of the way and shoot it in the face, only for the monster to move its head at the last second. As my arrow pierces one of the petals, its arm swipes out and I go crashing into the wall by the front door, body falling onto the ground. My ears ring and my eyes are blurry as I watch what looks like Jonathan get knocked over, too. I blink and groan when something wet drips down my right eye, and I swipe at it. When I pull my fingers back, they look dark.

Nancy is shooting at the monster, screaming in fear. *I'm not losing another friend, not today.* I groan and push myself up, arms shaking but my left hand still gripping my bow. I stagger towards her, ankle making a snapping sound as I go, and I hold in my own yell of pain. Nancy runs out of ammo, and I step in front of her, notched arrow loose and hitting the Demogorgon in the chest.

It roars and scratches at me, and I close my eyes, ready to get hit.

Only for someone to shove me behind them, ordering me to stay back. I open them when someone else wraps their arms around me, pressing something into my hand and forcing me to hold it to my temple.

There, right where I had almost been killed, stands Steve Harrington, nail bat in hand as he ducks and hits the monster, as if he's been doing it his whole life. I open my mouth in awe as he forces the Demogorgon into the hall, swinging the bat in his hand like any professional player, knocking the monster in the stomach.

Its foot falls into the trap, and the creature screeches in pain. "It's in the trap!" Steve yells, bat still out as he stands in front of me, right next to Nancy.

"Jonathan, now!" Nancy shouts, making my ears ring more.

My best friend rushes forward and throws the open zippo onto the carpet drenched in gasoline, and I cover my eyes with my forearm as the Demogorgon is set ablaze. As it keeps screeching, my stomach twists into knots.

What if the house burns down?

Someone shares the same fear as me, too, because when I remove my forearm from my eyes I see Jonathan blowing out the fire with the extinguisher Nancy stole from the station.

When the smoke begins to clear, I cover my mouth in fear.

Because there's no charred remains to greet us. Instead there's just the same goo as when the Demogorgon makes a rift. Which means it's still alive, and smart enough to know not to come back.

*It also means that my brother and his friends are alone in the middle school, and the Party requires assistance.*

I stagger back, Steve turning and catching me. "Roni?" He asks.

"I need... the school. My brother. I promised. Please, I need to protect him!" I tell him. "Jonathan, I need the keys to your car." I turn to my best friend, lowering the hand pressed to my temple and realizing Nancy had quickly grabbed me a random rag.

He only shakes his head, walking over to me. "Ver, your head is bleeding! You... I -"

"Now! Or I'll try to hotwire it!" I warn, growling lowly and tossing the bloodied cloth to the side.

"Take mine." Steve tells me, before Jonathan can dig out his own.

"Steve -" I whisper, but he shakes his head.

"Speed, scratch it, I don't care. Go protect your brother."

Ignoring my confusion, I catch the keys as he tosses them and run out

the door as best I can with an ankle on fire.

The car door is still open, so all I have to do is jump in and start the engine.

I drive like I'm in a goddamn race, pushing way past the limit, but Steve's Beemer drives like a dream. The drive is normally a good twenty minutes, but I get there in ten at the rate I'm speeding.

I park haphazardly, not in the careful way I usually do. I vaguely realize as I'm locking up and running into the school that I never even took off my quiver or bow.

But that's a good thing, it really is. Because I can smell the blood as I run down the halls, the kids nowhere to be seen. And if I can smell blood, so can the Demogorgon.

I keep running, my ankle screaming in pain, my forehead bleeding, blood dripping down to my eye, and my body even more bruised than it was this morning. *God, did I just wake up in the hospital this morning?* I definitely broke my ankle, if the way I'm stumbling means anything. I want to cry, I really do, but the adrenaline wins out.

I'm gagging when I turn one corner and see bodies strewn all over the ground, ripped up beyond recognition. Blood runs down the halls like some twisted stream, pooling around bodies shamelessly. I haven't seen death like *this*.

I can just make out the kids screaming, and I try to follow their cries. "Dustin, Mike, Lucas, El!" I shout on repeat, limping through the halls and peering into classrooms.

I find them, though, eventually. In the history classroom. What I find has me screaming, watching in terror as El does the same, her hand held out as she turns the Demogorgon into dust, a bright light surrounding her. She turns her head and sees me first, holding onto the door as I try to move but can't. I realize as I'm looking into her eyes that she's *keeping me in place*.

"Sorry. Saving you." She tells me, then looks back at the boys, zeroing in on Mike. "Goodbye, Mike."



And with a burst of light that has me closing my eyes, she's gone, the dusted-Demogorgon debris drifting through the air. I collapse onto my knees, finally able to move but my body starting to shut down. I reach out for the boys, wanting to hold them, but I just... I can't move. And this time, that's all on me.

As my eyes flutter shut, I vaguely make out a blurry Dustin rushing over to me, can hear multiple footsteps following him. "Promised... I promised you I'd come back..." I murmur, and then the world goes black.

---

I wake up to the sound of beeping, again. I reach out to smack the alarm, but end up hitting nothing but air. I groan and blink my eyes open, moaning about lights despite them being relatively dim. "Mom, turn it off, I'm sleeping." I mumble, only to reopen them when I hear someone scampering over to me. "Dustin?" I mutter, making out a cap covering curly hair. "D?"

"I'm here. Jesus Christ, you scared me! Mom and dad are outside, speaking to the doctor." I try to sit up, but then give up when I groan in pain. "Whoa, hey, no. No, no. Stay. You're really bruised up, Leia. Like, it's worse than that time you fell off the tree."

"Was trying to save a cat." I remind him, biting my lip as I shift. My left leg feels heavier than usual, and I tilt my head so I can get a better view. There's white plaster covering my calf to the middle of my foot. "What the hell?"

"Yeah, well, turns out running around on a *sprained ankle* after *surviving an abduction to an alternate dimension* while not being *properly fed or hydrated* can contribute into *breaking said ankle*. Not to mention being *thrown into a wall*." He sasses me, and I smile.

"Yeah, but I looked badass doing it." I tell him, giving him a wink. He smiles.

"You did. Hey, Leia, I heard you drove Steve Harrington's car. Did you steal the keys from him?"

I shuffle in bed, frowning. "Uh, I..." I bite my lip as the memories

come back to me, and smile to myself. "No. No, he, uh. He gave them to me. Insisted, actually. Even gave me permission to speed and scratch it. Do you think it's possible we've got an *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* situation?" I ask, and Dustin snorts.

"Yeah, maybe. We should keep an eye out on him."

"Mhmm." I keep smiling to myself, remembering the way Steve swung the nailed bat with practiced ease, twirling it in his hand like some pro. God, and I thought he couldn't get more attractive.

*Damn, whatever the doctor gave me is good.*

*Wonder if Will is getting the same.*

*Will. El.*

I gasp and look at my brother. "Will. Did they get him?"

"Yeah, yeah. He's asleep, right now. The doctor's said it'll be a little while, but he should be up soon. Just so you know, the Hawkins Lab people are here. Total infiltration, sis."

I groan. "Assholes." Then I nibble at my lip. "El?"

Dustin looks down, sniffing. "Gone. She's gone."

"No. No." I whimper, shaking my head. That little girl. So powerful, so innocent. She can't be gone. "Mike. Does he hate me? I tried to be fast, I tried to save you. I'm sorry I couldn't, I'm sorry I can't save anyone!" I cry, closing my eyes and moving my head to the other side.

"Whoa! Hey, sis. Shh." Dustin mumbles, climbing up to carefully sit next to me on the bed. I'm still looking away, though. "Mike isn't mad at you. Like, at all. He saw what El kept you from doing. He knows. He... sis, you should have seen it. He was sitting next to you in the ambulance the whole time they were checking on him. I had to basically fight him to sit with you."

I move my head to look at him, sure my green eyes are impossibly wide. "Really?"

"Yeah. And Lucas was pissed the fu-"

*"Language."* I warn.

"Fine, he was pissed off because we weren't allowed to ride with you, since mom is your legal guardian."

I smile, soft. "My boys love me."

"Yeah, loopy, we love you."

"Veronica! Oh, sweetheart!" My mom yells, and I jolt in bed, startled at the change in volume. Poor Dustin falls on the floor, but for once mom ignores him, her focus entirely on me. Which freaks me out, because the look on her face is telling me I'm extremely lucky I'm currently stuck in the hospital.

My dad is less vocal, but still looks happy to see me. He follows in after mom, just as awkwardly as before. "How long have I been asleep?" I mumble, looking up at my parents as my mom brushes her hand through my loose blonde curls.

"A few hours. It's barely three in the morning." I nod, then watch as a doctor comes in, looking much less severe than Dr. Brenner. She gives me a smile, despite how serious her eyes are.

"Welcome back, Ms. Henderson. You were quite the handful yesterday, if I'm not mistaken."

I shrug. It's a small and painful gesture, but still. "Yeah, well, next time don't assign me a doctor who doesn't actually work here." I tell her, ignoring the way my mom scolds my tone.

Dad doesn't even bother. Good. He lost the right to parent me like that four years ago.

"Whatever. So, what's the damage, doc?" I ask.

She looks over my chart, then smiles at me. "The good news is we can discharge you at the end of the day. We'll be keeping you here until then, just in case, but you were lucky."

"She has a stitches on her forehead and a broken ankle! Not to mention the bruising!" My mother panics.

"Mom, it's fine. Dudes dig scars." I wiggle my eyebrows, and wink at my brother, ignoring the pain.

The doctor is also quick to reassure my mom. "She suffered no broken ribs or internal bleeding, which is what we were most concerned about. The bruises will fade, but I'd like to recommend she rest at home for a week, just to let her body settle. You'll have to eat light for a few days, to get your appetite back. And I would like you to only drink water for about a week, to prevent dehydration. The cut on your hand will heal, and did not require stitches. Keep it bandaged and clean, though, we don't want to risk an infection. Your ankle had a clean break, but you'll still have to be off it for six weeks."

"Can I still practice archery?" I ask, and my mom lets out a tearful laugh.

The doctor nods, grinning a bit. "You'll have to do it seated, but I don't see why not. Now, as for your forehead, your right temple has sixteen stitches in it. There's a salve one of the nurses will give you before you're discharged. I'd like you to come back in a week to have them removed, but if you apply the salve regularly, it'll heal nicely."

Scars don't bother me. They tell a story. But I appreciate the gesture, so I nod. "Thanks, doc."

"You're welcome. A nurse will be by in a few minutes, to get you situated with your crutches."

"Crutches, good call. I'd just use the wheelchair for nefarious reasons. Always said I'd use a wheelchair to win a race." I tell her.

The doctor smiles. "Yes, your father warned us. The halls of this hospital thank his honesty."

I grin, happy I at least got a doctor with some spark, and I try to ignore how happy I am my dad remembers my mischievous promise from, like, years ago.

"Well, the nurse will be by soon. I believe you have some friends waiting to see you, but your parents were adamant they wait. I'll see you before you're discharged."

I shoot my mom and dad a look, but they're too busy following the doctor out of the room. I roll my eyes and awkwardly sit up, reaching out my hand to hold onto Dustin's. "Goddamn parents." I mutter, and Dustin grins at me.

"They're the goddamn worst."

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"Mom, seriously, come on, I can go by myself!" I awkwardly crutch away from my mom, heading into the bathroom. Mom picked up some clothes while I had been sleeping, and I find a thick green sweatshirt, one fuzzy sock and slipper, clean underwear, and grey sweatpants with the wide legs. There's no bra, which I appreciate greatly seeing as how my whole upper body is bruised up. At least my boobs aren't huge or saggy, or this would all be incredibly awkward.

I sit on the toilet, relieving myself as well as removing my hospital gown and underwear. I very carefully ease my sweatshirt over my head, stopping more often than I'd like to avoid the gauze on my right temple. I smile softly when I remember Steve was wearing something similar, when I last saw him.

My arms shake, sore, but I welcome it. It reminds me that I'm still alive. I'm trying not to think about the bad, about how I failed. I'll do that when my ankle isn't on fire and my whole body feels less like it was trampled by a herd of Hungry Hungry Hippos.

So instead I pull on my new underwear and ease my grey sweatpants, minding the cast on my left leg. I put the fuzzy sock on my right foot and slide it into the blue slipper before wiping, flushing, and putting all my weight on my right side as I stand and hop over to the sink. I wash my hands, avoiding the bandage on my right limb, pull my underwear and pants up all the way and grab my crutches.

I practiced in my room for about five minutes, to get the hang of it. I nearly tipped over seven times before my dad awkwardly

demonstrated it to me, having broken his leg when he was a senior in high school. And as long as I only rest my right fingers on the handgrip, it doesn't rub against my wound.

My curls are down and loose, and I realize that I've never actually kept them down before, outside of my house. I either braid it or force it into a smooth ponytail. But I'm too tired to style it, so I simply run my fingers through my hair and let them fall down to my biceps.

Opening the door is awkward, but what really takes the cake is the fact that my dad is waiting for me. "Hi."

"Hi?" I ask, crutching over to him. "What's up, uh, dad?" I clear my throat.

"I just... I wanted to say... damn, this is so hard." I hold in my dirty not-really-a-joke about how hard he was for his secretary-turned-wife. "I'm sorry. I'm so sorry, kid. I've done a lot of shit things, but leaving you... God, I'm an ass."

"If you're expecting me to say 'oh, no, you're not' I won't be doing that. Anytime soon. It's not just me you walked out on. You left mom, and you left Dustin. Sweet, lovely, smart, brave Dustin who kept asking when you were coming home. Sorry doesn't cover the fact that I became depressed and anxious and push people away because I have this fear of being left behind, again. See, if you had just been honest and said you loved Allison more than mom, well, we all would have still been hurt. But that's a lot easier to come back from as opposed to lying about your affair for a whole year, and getting caught by your twelve-year-old daughter." I scoff, and crutch towards the open hospital door. "Look, you're my dad. A part of me is always going to love you for the good things you did. Like how you taught me how to hunt, taught me how to survive on my own even if I shouldn't have to, just in case I was alone. I never would have survived what happened to me those four days without those lessons." He nods, watching me tearfully. "But dad, you've been gone for four years, and brief visits that include the woman you slept with then married doesn't count as 'good times'. You know? And all the cars in the world won't make up for the fact you haven't been around for Dustin. I could give a *fuck* about me, I learned how to deal with this shit. But Dustin shouldn't have had to. Mom, either. So as much

as I love you, I hate you even more. Thanks, for coming. Really. For being here for mom and D, even if it was only for a little while. But the next time we talk... it's going to be on my terms. Say hi to Allison for me." I tell him, then crutch away, feeling like I'm walking on air.

Because I said everything I had to, everything I wanted to the minute I caught my dad. And now that I'm old enough to know how to word how I feel, the anger isn't holding me down.

Besides, I've got new demons to worry about.

Mom and Dustin are waiting for me down the hall, mom giving me a sad smile and a kiss on the cheek when she notices it's just me. "I'm so proud of you, dumpling." She tells me.

"Come on, everyone wants to see you!" Dustin shouts, ignoring how startled the nurses get. "Jonathan and Mrs. Byers are with Will, but everyone else is in the waiting room." He tells me, a little calmer after mom scolds him. I laugh at his enthusiasm, following after him slowly.

Mom opens the door and steps through first, keeping it wide as Dustin patiently leads me in. "Ladies and gentlemen, I present milady Veronica Leigh Henderson, Huntress." I snort at his accent, but still bow my head. Mike and Lucas stand and bow, Erica Sinclair (Lucas's little sister) giving me a sassy curtsy but happy smile. The parents applaud and laugh at their antics, and I roll my eyes, attempting to ignore how hot my face has gotten.

"Jesus Christ, Dustin." I mutter.

Nancy literally pushes past the kids, carefully wrapping me in a hug I can't physically return without knocking us both over. "You are such a bitch. I can't believe I let you run off like that!" She whisper-yells in my ear, and I laugh.

"Sorry, sis." I tell her, and she makes a small, pleased noise.

"Yeah, yeah, you pain in the ass."

"Actually, my foot's the thing that hurts. My ass is fine." I joke, and she *snorts*. When she steps away, the other kids take it as their cue to

hug me. Lucas goes first, demanding I help him with his slingshot skills. I agree, happy there's at least someone I know who's interested in long range weapons. Erica is next, shoving Mike out of the way to carefully wrap her arms around my waist.

"You pull that shit again, I'm beating your ass myself." She growls at me, as ferocious as I taught her. As always, her parents don't hear her. Still, it makes me smile.

"Aw, kiddo, you say the sweetest things. Now beat it, twerp."

"I ain't no twerp." She bites, but moves out of the way nonetheless. Mr. and Mrs. Sinclair are warm as always when they come up to me, Lucas's dad giving me a friendly pat on the shoulder and his mom kissing my cheek.

"If you scare my kids like that again, I'm finding you and firing you." Mrs. Sinclair warns, whispering in my ear. I smile, my whole body glowing at how many people seem to care about me, despite how icy and pulled back I've been.

"Absolutely." I agree, and Mrs. Sinclair moves aside.

Before Mike can hug me, Mr. and Mrs. Wheeler each give me a friendly hug. Mr. Wheeler's is awkward, but Karen is all motherly and warm, careful of my injuries but still holding me.

Mike, a very irritated look on his face, shoves Steve aside, making the bruised teen stagger. If it wasn't for the fact the Wheeler boy demanded my attention I would have teased Harrington for it endlessly.

Instead, I focus on Mike. He wraps himself around me, careful of my injuries but also not completely gentle. It's surprisingly nice, it makes me feel grounded. "Thanks for coming back for us."

"I was too late." I mumble, so only he can hear. "I'm so sorry. You know I'm gonna regret not being fast enough, right?"

Mike looks up, silently crying. "You risked death to come save us. Twice. So you're not allowed to regret it." Easier said than done, kid, but I just settle for hugging him again.



"Okay, okay, my turn. Jesus." Steve mumbles, and his adamancy surprises me for a second, until I remember how softly he'd touched my face in the alley, before our fight. And how he pushed me behind him when he came to our aid in the Byers house.

"Eager, Steven?" I ask him quietly, and I look at Nancy. She's just amused, though, and every so often her eyes drift out the door, as if she's trying to seek out Jonathan.

"Yeah, well, figured I could give you a hug. I mean, you still went way over the speed limit, but the Beemer didn't get a scratch."

"You gave me permission." I remind him, light and teasing.

"Yeah, well, still. It was a heat of the moment thing, alright?"

"Yes, Your Majesty, King Steve." I bow my head like I did earlier, ignoring his scoff. "Are you gonna hug me or not, dumbass?"

"Well, if you keep calling me that -"

"Oh, whatever." Before I can crutch away, he gives me a hug. It's gentler than I imagined one from him being, seeing as how he's always vibrating with energy. Maybe it's because of my injuries, or maybe it's something else, but this hug is soft, gentle, and patient. It's like new beginnings, and when we break apart and I stare into his brown - *no, hazel, how did I not notice it before? Well, I mean, they do look brown in certain lighting* - eyes, they're warm and remind me of home.

"I'm glad you're okay, Roni." He whispers.

"Roni'?" I finally ask, not having had the chance to at the Byers house, with everything that was going on.

Steve steps away from me to run his hand through his precious hair. "I figured I'd try something new. And hey, look, we match." He gestures between our tops.

I bite my lip and smile up at him, before looking away. "I like it. Um, I'm kinda tired, I'm gonna -"

"Do you need help?" He asks, before blushing as well at how immediate his response is. I shake my head, though. I know, after everything, there's still something between him and Nancy. I made peace with the fact I'll only ever be Steve's friend at most. Having him in my life and learning to love him as a *friend* is way more important than losing a new sister over boy drama.

"Thanks, but I've got it." I crutch over to Nancy, who eases me down into the seat beside her. She offers her hand to me and I take it, leaning against her as we wait to hear about Will. My mom gives me a warm smile, before turning and talking to the other parents quietly.

It can't be more than 10 minutes later when the door slams open, and we all jump a bit. But it's not Jonathan, or Joyce.

Hopper's standing in the open doorway, looking at me with absolute sharpness. I gulp, standing up as he marches my way - with help from Nancy - and cringe when he leans down and points to me in his usual authoritative way. "That was neither *smart* nor *safe*." He growls at me, and I wince at the harshness in his tone. "I'm really tempted to put you on house arrest, and I know your mom will let me."

I glance over to her for a little help, but my mom does that thing where she crosses her arms, raises an eyebrow, and smiles innocently.

Yeah, she may seem all nice and loving - which, okay, she is - but underneath all that lies one hell of a tough woman.

"I'm sorry." I whisper, looking up at the Chief, the man who's been there for me since my dad left, helping to make sure I stay in line. But in all that time, I've never seen him as scared and angry as he is right now, glaring down at me.

Hopper breathes out through his nose and ruffles my blonde curls, a little calmer. "The next time you pull that shit, I'm locking you up."

"Okay." I smile at him, and he gestures for me to sit back down, walking over to take the chair between Mr. Wheeler and my mom.

I sigh and tilt my head so the back of it is resting on Nancy's shoulder, and let myself drift off once more.

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A sharp poke to my shoulder has me opening my eyes, nearly about to scream before I see it's Jonathan kneeling in front of me. He's wary of my foot and there are tears in his eyes, but he's smiling. "Hey, hey. It's just me. You're safe." He whispers, and my eyes flick around the waiting room to see the kids and Nancy running out the door.

I look back into Jonathan's eyes, taking in how relieved he looks. "Will?" He nods, and I smile, tearing up and throwing my arms around him, ignoring how sore my body is.

"C'mon, let's get you to him." He hums, helping me stand. I take the crutches and follow him out.

Will is lying in bed, the kids covering him with hugs while Joyce attempts to calm them down and be careful. I gasp and cover my mouth with my hand, sobs coming out. Happy ones.

"Will." I whisper, the kids back off. He smiles when he sees me, and despite his paleness and how sunken in his brown eyes are, he's alive. "Will!" I shout, crutching over to him and carefully setting them aside so I can give him a careful hug, Joyce stroking my back lovingly.

"Veronica." He breathes out, and I kiss his forehead before I pull away. "You look rough."

I snort wetly and wipe away my tears and snot. "You... God." I shake my head, amused.

He grins back, but then the kids get his attention.

As they tell him about the *Demogorgon*, the *funeral*, *Troy pissing himself*, I look over to Jonathan, giving him a warm smile, which he returns.

Then my eyes flick over to where Nancy is standing, arms wrapped around herself.

As quietly as I can, I sneak away from the group and lead her outside, down a separate corridor.

All we have to do is look at each other, blue eyes meeting green, before we break down and hold onto one another. I don't offer words

of comfort, and neither does she. We just cry for the friend we both failed to save.

## 7. The Sweet Thereafter

Hi all, and welcome to my *Stranger Things* Steve Harrington/OC story! It's been a long, long time coming. Seriously. Since 2017 long.

I just updated the first chapter, so this is a little different than the original I posted. In this story, we've got the Ice Queen of Hawkins, the older-but-shorter-by-season 2 sister of Dustin Henderson, because he deserves an older sibling. She's Veronica, and even though *Heathers* came out in 1989 I've taken the liberty of borrowing some of my favorite quotes because Winona Ryder Easter Eggs. Seriously, I cannot overstate my love for that movie. Anyway, there's more of a backstory for the Henderson family, including adding the dad to the "asshole fathers club", co-president with Lonnie Byers, the prick. Expect explicit language because, hello, *Stranger Things* isn't known for censoring language.

Fair warning, while this is Steve/OC the season 2 part will include Billy/OC, but not for long. I promise. He's a great villain, but he's a dick until he isn't. Just wanted to get that out of the way. Because again, he's a dick. But I'm also treating their relationship a bit like Jackson Whittemore and Lydia Martin's from *Teen Wolf*, especially with the later outcome. And there will also be inbetween chapters between ST 1 and ST 2, then ST 2 and ST 3, adding some more things as well as a deeper dive into how Max and Billy's relationship changes, because let's be honest that wasn't really commented on in ST 3, and I'd like to see it. But this will not be a Billy Hargrove/OC endgame story. Not like that.

Alright, I know it's a few days late, but here is the next update! This takes place a week after the events of ST1, picking up with Veronica coming back to school. Like I said previously it's a bit of a filler, showing what happened to her inbetween Will waking up in the Hospital and Christmas Eve of '83. This chapter includes a few flashbacks, Tommy and Carol being dicks, Nancy reminded Veronica not to shut her out and that she isn't alone.

There's also her first visit to Hawkins Lab with Dr. Owens. Because she was in the Upside Down for so long without a mask I've decided to explore how it physically affected her. We know Will gets possessed because a vine was shoved down his throat and that's how he has the connection to the Mind Flayer, but Veronica still sucked in a lot of toxic air that probably had his particles (gross) floating around. She won't go through the same stuff as Will, but she will still be affected by the Upside Down, which gets touched on as a precursor in this update. The next one will be her birthday/Thanksgiving, the "surprise" party, and also have a time skip to Christmas Eve. After that we'll get her flashbacks of summer and see her meet Billy. So sit tight, there's more to come.

Enjoy the story! I only own Veronica.

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*I tap my fingers against the armrests of my chair, the nurse taking her sweet time in getting me my medication. My family is sitting in the waiting room on the doctor's orders, telling them there was still a personal "patient-doctor" confidential conversation to be had.*

*As the door to the check-up room opens, I stop tapping my fingers and straighten as much as I can with a bruised body and broken foot.*

*The nurse has returned, yes, with a woman and two men in suits, not unlike the agents I saw dead in the school. Hawkins Lab representatives, here to keep me quiet.*

*"Jesus, does anyone in this hospital even work here?" I ask, the nurse giving me a deadpan expression before setting my pain medication on the table beside me and leaving the room. "I'm taking that as a 'no!'" I call after her.*

*"Ms. Henderson. How are you doing?" The woman asks, but there's a coldness in her voice I easily recognize. I narrow my eyes in return, copying her tone.*

*"How do you think I'm doing?"*

*The woman just looks at me, unimpressed, and pushes forward a large*

document with red tabs on each page. She hands me a pen, the two men behind her more like guards than active participants. "We need you to sign this document. It will help keep this whole incident under wraps, from everyone not involved. That includes your parents."

"No."

"No?"

"No. I'm not signing shit without a lawyer present."

"I am a lawyer." She tells me, and I raise my eyebrows.

"Well, I sure as hell didn't hire you. So again, I'm not signing shit."

"I'm afraid you don't have a choice."

"Hm. What happens if I rip this up and throw it in your face?"

"I can assure you, nothing good. We're very good at covering things up."

I catch her threat. "Like you're going to cover up Barb's death?"

"Barbara Holland's death is a tragedy. Unfortunately, the circumstances involved make it dangerous to tell anyone the truth. Can you imagine the panic that would ensue if people were to know what really happened this past week." The agent's tone turns more "fake-pleading".

"Her parents deserve to know that she isn't just missing. They need closure, they need to bury her." I argue, and the woman's face becomes blank once more.

"Sometimes not knowing is better than suffering the consequences of the truth."

"Are you threatening me?"

"Yes." She answers simply, tone growing dangerous. My mind flashes to an ashy forest and moving vines. "Let me be clear. If you do not sign this document, you and everyone you care about are in for a world of trouble. But if you do sign this document, this never has to be discussed again. You can move on, your life can return to normal. And the people you love will

*be safe." The "from us" is heavily implied.*

*I bite my lip. I'm going to figure out how to expose them, Barb. "Fine, I'll sign."*

*"Excellent. We've taken the liberty of marking which signatures to fill." I nod at her words and balance the papers on my lap, flicking through the pages and signing away my right to free speech. "There's one more thing. While there seem to fortunately be no residual toxicity in your body from your time away, we need you to come in to the Lab once a week. Think about your visits like 'check-ups'."*

*"With Dr. Brenner? Cause that'll be a hard pass." I don't look up from signing.*

*"Dr. Brenner is indisposed."*

*"Dead?"*

*"Unknown."*

*"So who am I going to be seeing."*

*"Our new director, Dr. Owens. And that was not a request, Ms. Henderson."*

*"You want me to come in to observe me, right? Treat me like I'm some damn guinea pig?" I ask, handing her back the pen and document. She flips through everything, nodding in that "I've got all the power, I'm super happy I got a 15-year-old to follow my order" way.*

*"Yes. But this will be good for you, too. A way for us to help you heal, to show you that things will get better." Her voice turns sickly sweet, like she actually cares.*

*I wish I could say things started to look up, once Will was found. That all of us who were there learned to move on and adapt to this new world. But that would be a lie, and I don't like to lie. Even though that's part of my new reality.*

*The truth is - the ugly truth - things have gotten worse. We lost people. It wasn't just Barb, Will, and I that were taken. Four more*



people were abducted that whole strange week, lost and never found. Well, there bodies were probably found by the people at Hawkins Lab, but never returned. I can't even look Mr. and Mrs. Holland in the eyes without bursting into guilty tears. They came over, my second day back at home. They offered me words of comfort, promised me there was no ill-will towards me on their part. I believe them. I had to lie to them, though. I told them we were taken while walking back to her car, that when I woke up I was alone in a dark, dirty room, and by some miracle managed to get out. *"I tried to look for her, I searched every room,"* I promised them, *"but I couldn't find her. Then, I had to run. They were coming after me, and I needed to get help."*

The Hollands aren't the only people I've had to lie to. I spent four days in my house, wondering why neither my mom nor my dad - who left right after I was completely discharged - didn't ask me what had happened, why I was more injured than before. It was Dustin who broke the news to me, when I finally asked him.

*"D, why didn't mom hound me? Or you? Why is she acting like nothing else... happened to me?"*

*Dustin sighs and pushes back his curls, pausing Jaws. "Mom and dad had to sign those documents, just like us. But theirs were different. That's what those dickhead scientists told me, anyway, while you were busy sleeping off your poor decisions in the hospital."*

*I roll my eyes at his sassiness, then sit up a bit more in my bed, adjusting my left leg. "What'd those dickheads tell you?"*

*"That what they signed made them swear not to ask any questions about what happened, including with us. That we were bound to secrecy and 'sharing such information would make mom and dad a liability' or some shit. I don't know. The point is, we're in the clear."*

We aren't in the clear from mom's overprotectiveness, though. She's spent this whole week standing behind me, watching my every move. When she has to drive Dustin to school and pick him up, she takes me with her. If Dustin decides to go spend time with his other friends minus a still-hospitalized Will, I'm plucked out of bed.

The only time she left me alone was when I went to go see Will. She'd

use my visitation time to go into the office, leaving me a few hours every other day to just *breathe*. Sort of. Because seeing Will also meant having Joyce *and* Jonathan treat me like I'm about to break. More.

Will and I don't do that to each other, though. He and I... well, we went through similar shit, only I never had a vine shoved down my throat. We talk about everything; Barb, the Demogorgon, the Upside Down. How thin the air was, how everything was so cold. How every time we close our eyes, it's like we're back there.

Jonathan and Joyce are gone during these conversations. We don't want to worry them, and I don't want anything getting back to my mom, or worse, Dustin. Who also refuses to leave me alone and tried to follow me into the bathroom before I managed to shove him away with a crutch.

I get it though, I do. I was gone for four days, I ran away from a hospital, and I end up in a worse condition than after I was found. Dustin watched me pass out from exhaustion and blood loss, and had to sit through my breakdown by the inflatable pool. It doesn't mean I enjoy being figuratively suffocated, though.

Like right now, as I crutch towards my mom's car, my brother following only a foot behind, my mom a few inches in front of me. If Nancy and Jonathan were here, they'd be on either side of me, effectively acting like my bodyguards.

I don't need bodyguards.

After getting me situated and carefully handing me my bag, mom and Dustin get in the car. Mom doesn't turn the key in the ignition, though. She sits there for a few moments, watching Dustin and I buckle in. "You don't have to go in today, sweetheart. I can take another day off of work."

"No, you can't." I gently remind her, feeling the walls close in as they keep staring. "I want to go to school, mom."

She doesn't listen to me, though. Instead, she turns to look back at my little brother. "I can get you out of class too, baby. Have you

watch your sister while I go into the office."

"Really? Sweet."

"Guys, I said I can go in."

"But should you, Leia?" Dustin asks, managing to sound like a child and an exasperated adult all at once.

I turn my head and glare at him, smiling inwardly when he backs off. I've still got it. "Dustin, mom. I need to go to school. I... I want to move on."

My mother sighs and starts the car. "Fine. But the minute you feel overwhelmed -"

"I'll call you. I promise." She nods and backs out of the driveway. I feel guilty, though. Because again, I get it. I really do. If what happened to me had happened to either of them... I'd be even more protective than they are right now. "Mom, I loved spending the week with you. And Dustin. You both really helped me, and I really am grateful. But the doctor said I should try to get back into a normal routine, and staying at home or being in the hospital isn't normal for me."

My mom take my hand and squeezes it. "Dumpling, I understand. It was just so hard. Sometimes I think you're still missing. I'm sorry if I've been -"

"Mommy, it's okay." I promise, squeezing back and blinking away unshed tears. "I get it. And I promise I'll call you during lunch."

"Okay." She lets out a shaky breath, then seems to will herself to change the subject. "Oh, and Chief Hopper called this morning, to check up on you. He said you asked him to take you to your appointment, at the... the place." Hawkins Lab, something she can't discuss.

"Yes, uh. I figured, since he's the Chief and was, you know... I thought it'd be a good idea, and make you feel a little better. Is that alright? I need to go, but I know the both of us want me safe, and he seemed like the best choice."

She smiles at me. "Of course it's alright. I've always liked that man."

I breathe out. "Okay, good. That's good." My eyes flick up to the rearview mirror, where my brother is sullenly watching me with his arms crossed. "Did you want to come too? I thought you were going to go with the boys to see Will?"

"I can do that after."

"D -"

"Excuse me for wanting to look after my big sis!" He shouts, frustrated. Mom and I don't jump at his outburst, though. I only release her hand to reach back and grab Dustin's.

"If you want to come, you can. And I'll have Hopper drop you off at the hospital after. If mom's okay with that?"

"Yes, it's fine pumpkins. I'll pick Dusty up from seeing Will and we can stop and pick up dinner on the way back."

"Okay." I smile and pull my hand from Dustin's, staring down at my small limbs. The right one is still bandaged, though not as thickly as before. It's already scabbing, too, but I know it's going to be there for awhile. Like the scar on my temple, whose stitches were removed yesterday.

Mom pulls into the high school first, stopping as close to the building as possible. And unsurprisingly, I see Nancy waiting for me, Steve holding her hand and Jonathan awkwardly leaning on the brick wall. I ignore the pang in my heart when I see the couple, and even from the passenger seat of my mom's car I can tell Jonathan feels the same.

Mom helps me out and steadies me while I put on my backpack. I take my crutches from Dustin and let them hug me goodbye before I make my way over to my friends.

Nancy comes to me first, a kind smile on her face as she pulls me into a sisterly hug. "Oh my God, I'm so happy you're back!"

"Me too, girl." I look over her shoulder and up at Jonathan, who steps into a hug after Nancy finally releases me.

"How's Will doing?" I ask him, even though I saw the boy just after the doctor took care of my stitches.

"Better. Mom's with him, now, but I'm going to take over for her after school while she goes into the work. Did you want me to take Dustin with me? I'm already driving with Lucas and Mike."

"No, it's fine. Hopper's giving us both a lift." Jonathan nods in understanding, the Hawkins Lab reps also demanding Will comes in for weekly check-ups, too. When he's no longer hospitalized, at least.

My oldest friend lets go, and Steve wraps me in a comforting hug, gentle and tough at the same time. "It's good to have you back, Roni."

"Why? Missed having someone to verbally spar with? Your old buddies not good enough?"

"No, they're not. Besides, arguing with you is, like, the highlight of my school day. Besides being with you, Nance." He quickly reassures her, but she only smiles, like she didn't expect him to say any different.

"Aw, Steven, you say the sweetest things." We break apart and I poke at his bicep, smiling cheekily. "I'm really looking forward to beating you in the battle of the wits, again."

"Please, I won every time."

"You so did not." I playfully scoff. "Nance, you hear this guy?" I ask my sister, who rolls her eyes but smiles in amusement.

We start walking into the building, and I try to ignore everyone staring at me. Like they think I'm some broken thing after everything that happened. Like the Ice Queen of Hawkins thawed and cracked. She didn't, though. If anything, all that coldness and harshness has grown since Hawkins Lab made me hide the truth about Barb's death. Since I watched El vanish. Since I made it out of the Upside Down with post-traumatic stress as a souvenir. That's what my shrink called it, anyway, when I saw her on Saturday. I couldn't tell her everything, obviously, but trauma is still trauma.

I look around discreetly, willing the flashing images of the school

dark and vine-covered to go away, even though I never saw that in person when I was abducted. I can imagine it was, though, since Steve's house looked like that.

Their looks, though, are nothing compared to what happens when Steve and Jonathan open the doors and I crutch through with Nancy by my side.

All conversation stops, silence rolling down the hall like a wave as students stop and stare, waiting for something to happen. I can hear my heartbeat picking up, feel my blood pumping faster. I hate attention, I always have. It's nearly as bad as pity. "We can leave, if you want." Nancy whispers, and I give her a disbelieving look.

"Yeah, and then the whole school will be talking about it." I hiss, then turn to look ahead and roll my shoulders back.

My crutches click against the floor as I move, staring straight ahead. All eyes are on me, but I refuse to meet them.

I can do this, I can do this.

"Welcome back, Ice Queen!" Tommy shouts, jumping in front of me. Carol's next to him, chewing her bubblegum with a smug expression. "And she's accompanied by the creep, the princess, and King Steve!" He declares. Steve straightens, standing a little in front of us.

"Back off, man." Steve warns, and Tommy gets in his face.

"Or what? You couldn't even take Creepy Byers."

"I don't know, pal, pretty sure even Carol could take you out."

"Steve, let's just go -" Nancy tries, taking her boyfriend's elbow.

"Aw, the slut speaks!" Carol sings, grinning like the Cheshire Cat. "How adorable."

"Jesus Christ." I groan to myself, just loud enough to have the two assholes focus on me. I smile inwardly at how Nancy relaxes, even if it's accompanied with her leaning into Steve.

"You in pain, Ice Queen? Need a hand?" Tommy asks, and I wrinkle my nose.

"Oh, gross." I look over at Carol. "You heard that, right?"

She ignores me in favor of blowing a bubble. "Tommy, don't encourage her. She may think you actually care."

I can't help it. I just laugh. Not a soft one, either. It borders a bit on hysterical, has me coughing for air a bit and doubling over as my body shakes. The hall is still silent, but I'm too busy learning how to breathe again to care. I look up and wipe away tears of laughter, Jonathan shaking his head at me like I've lost it. I definitely have. "Oh, man, I needed that. Can't believe you went and got funny on me while I was gone, Carol. You think either one of you matter to me? Really? You don't. See, it's my fault. I gave you too much time out of my day, and all that attention went to your heads. What? You think I'd come back all ready to roll over and show you my belly? Really?" I shake my head and grin viciously, crutching up to them. "You thought I was dangerous before? Well, after all the shit I had to deal with, I'm worse. I'm a goddamn nightmare. You really want to provoke me?" Tommy tries to speak, and I narrow my eyes, smirking like the Devil, tutting him. "Don't interrupt me, Thomas. See, I bet you think the crutches will slow me down. They won't. I just have two more things to help me beat the shit out of you, and I will. Talk to my friends like that again, no doctor in the world could fix the mess I'd leave you in." I look around at everyone else, and they start to shift, nervous. "That's right, I didn't come back broken. I came back crazy." I warn, and they look away, returning to their conversations. I look back at Tommy and Carol. "You two should probably get to class. Save you the embarrassment of being beaten up by a cripple."

"Whatever, bitch." Tommy grunt, knocking into Steve as he walks past us. Carol rushes after him, aiming to do the same to me before I narrow my eyes.

I roll my shoulders back again and continue onto my locker, opening it up. "Here, I got you." Steve tells me, steadying me as Jonathan takes my crutches and Nancy deals with my bag.

"Jesus, I can do this myself." I growl, attempting to shove them away.

"Seriously, back the hell off."

"Whoa, cool it." Steve tells me as I stumble. "Seriously, it's okay to ask for -"

"I said I'm fine!" I yell, walls thicker than before. They have to be, to keep everyone else away. Steve flinches, moving his arm away, but Nancy stops him.

I try not to flinch when my sister levels me with a glare, turning me to look at her while Jonathan leans against a nearby locker, observing unamusedly. "Stop it."

"Leave me alone, Na-"

"No. Shut. Up. Okay?" She says, in the same tone as when she got Steve to leave the Byers house. "You told me you'd be like this, remember? That was your mistake, warning me about your behavior. So you've only got yourself to blame if I choose to ignore you, got it?" She whispers harshly, still holding my bag. "I know you have to do this, to keep everyone away. I know you hate attention. But unfortunately, you've got three people who care too much about you to leave you alone." I struggle a bit, but Steve holds me in place and Jonathan levels me with a glare to match my own. "Vera, enough. Don't shut us out. Don't hide behind your walls, not from us. You think you're the only one who went through that bullshit."

"Nancy, I -"

"No. Stop. Talking." She glares harder. "Barb was my best friend, and now she's dead. Jonathan's little brother was missing for a week. Steve was thrust into a whole new world in a matter of minutes. You are not alone, so stop acting like you are!" She warns, quiet.

I blink, mouth open a bit, a little calmer. "Damn. You're a badass." I mutter. She grins, body less tense.

"Yeah. I'm stubborn, too."

I nod, then blush and look down. "Sorry. I just, I -"

"Yeah. I know." She opens my backpack and helps me get out what I



need for the first half of the day. "Wait, I brought something." I furrow my eyebrows as she hands my backpack to an equally confused Jonathan, who fumbles with it for a bit. I'm fully aware of Steve's hands on my waist, holding me up as I lean on my right foot.

Nancy finishes fishing through her shoulder bag and pulls out a small polaroid. "Mom found this, the other day. I have a similar one, but I didn't know if you did. I figured we could have one up in our locker. If you want to put it up, of course. This may've been a bad decision." I tilt my head as I take the photo, and turn it over. Tears fill my eyes as I look down. "I'm sorry, Vera. I shouldn't have - God, that was stupid, I -"

"This is perfect. Thank you." I whisper, eyes flicking up to meet hers. Steve helps me turn and I stick a spare magnet onto the photo, putting it right next to one of my brother and mom.

Nancy is sitting on her couch, Barb and I on either side of her. We have textbooks laid out on the table in front of us, pens and notebooks at the ready. Barb's head is thrown back in laughter, Nancy is staring at her with a wrinkled nose, and I'm smiling in a rare, soft way. It was taken last year, when we were studying for our final algebra test. We were happy. We were really happy.

I close the locker and put on my bag. My hands grasp the grips of my crutches, and I follow Steve and Nancy down the hall, Jonathan by my side. He gives me an equally pained look as the couple in front of us speak softly and hold onto each other.

We don't have the people we want, but we still have each other, family in all but blood.

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Hopper pulls up in front of the school, Dustin waving from the back of the man's car. I say goodbye to my friends, promising to call them later, and ignore the stares as I crutch over to the Chief of police. He just opens the door for me and helps me up, taking my crutches so he can throw them in the back.

We drive in silence for a few minutes. Dustin isn't even talking, and usually my little brother can't shut up. Finally I sigh. "So, my birthday

is in three days. Anyone get me any presents?" I finally ask. "16's a big year."

My brother jumps in. "Yes, we got you shit, Leia. What do you think mom was doing while you were visiting Will? Plus, there's the party - shit, ignore what I just said." He pleads, and I bite my lip in amusement, Hopper giving me a smirk. "Seriously, mom'll kill me. It's on Saturday, she ordered your favorite cake and everything, plus she invited the Party and your friends, and I know she got you -"

"Dustin!" I interrupt. "I'll pretend I don't know, okay? Jesus, you need a filter or something."

Hopper's shoulders are laughing as he drives, and I catch my brother blushing in the rearview mirror. "Sorry. Sorry, I just... you know I have loose lips!"

I snort. "That's for damn sure."

"Alright you two, keep it down. I'm trying to concentrate."

"On what?" Dustin asks the Chief.

"Driving." He answers, giving my little brother the stink-eye. Dustin just dimples.

"Hey, can you flash your lights."

"What did I just say, kid?" I smile at his exhaustion, only half-listening to their argument.

The car goes silent when we reach the entrance to Hawkins Lab, and my nails pierce my palms. "Hey. We don't have to go in." Hopper tells me, and I look up at him.

"If I don't, they'll drag me here. No thanks." He nods and drives up to the booth.

"Afternoon. I'm Chief Hopper. Here to drop off Veronica Henderson for her appointment with Dr. Owens."

The guard peers down to look at us. "Who's the extra kid?"

"Her little brother."

"I don't think he's -"

"Hey." Hopper interrupts. "This girl just survived four days in the hellhole you people opened. You're going to let her brother come in, that's the least you owe her."

The guard gulps when Hopper finishes speaking, and nods his head. The barrier lifts and the Chief drives through, giving the man a sarcastic salute as he goes.

"You didn't have to do that." I mutter, looking out the window and up at the lab.

"Yeah, I did." Hopper parks his car and gets out, letting out my brother in the process and grabbing my crutches. I leave my backpack in the car as Hopper helps me out, my brother walking next to me as we head into the Lab.

A portly man with balding silver hair and a kind smile is waiting for us at the front desk, looking every bit the opposite of Dr. Brenner. I still don't trust him, though, and neither do my companions if the way they straighten (comically, in Dustin's case) is anything to go by.

"Ah, Ms. Henderson. Chief Hopper, if I'm not mistaken. And who's this?"

"Dustin Henderson. Her brother." Dustin shakes the older man's hand, firmer than a 12-year-old should. Hopper makes a small noise, and when I briefly look up I see a small smile before it melts into his "I'm a cop, I'll shoot you" look.

"Yeah. Dr. Owens, the new director. Experiment on any kids recently?" The Chief asks, as though he's talking about the weather or some shit.

Dr. Owens only laughs, though, impressed. "No, no. I was never fond of that particular project. Now, let's go upstairs and take a look at our patient."

Owens leads us down the hall, towards the elevator. The further we

get from the front door, the more I panic, like I'm walking back to the Upside Down.

Which, of course I am. The gate is here. Well, down there. Below us. I can feel it, the coldness, the darkness. I can practically taste the dirty air, see the vines beneath and around me. "Hopper." I whisper, crutching closer into his body as we pass by some more scientists and military police, all of whom are looking at me like I'm some rare specimen.

"I got you, Robin Hood." The man promises, and Dustin steps a little in front of me to glare at the men and women observing me. I'm not sure it does much, but just watching him act so protective makes me smile, no matter how suffocating it can be, too. It also makes me sad. My little brother grew up so much in just a matter of two weeks. He shouldn't have to deal with this shit. I know he gets nightmares. I hear him, every time. I don't sleep much, anymore. It was bad when my dad left, but this is something entirely different. Worse. And if I do sleep, I wake up thinking I'm back there. Everywhere I turn, I see the Demogorgon or one of those weird little dog things. My mom offered me a turtleneck sweater the other day, but the thought of something tight around me neck sent me into a panic. My necklaces were shoved into the bottom drawer of my dresser: out of sight, out of mind. The collars of nearly all my shirts have been tugged, loosened so my neck doesn't feel like something is reaching to grab it and squeeze.

Before I know it I'm being led onto an exam chair, and I carefully sit on the paper. Dustin watches warily, Hopper has his hand on his belt, right next to his gun. "So, I saw on your form that your birthday's this Thursday. Do you have any plans?"

"Well, Thursday's also Thanksgiving, right? So I'm probably just gonna eat whatever I can without puking. Honestly, I haven't even thought about it. What with the abduction and all the deaths." I tell him, staring straight ahead.

"You know, I heard you gave Brenner's people a hard time." I shrug, and he laughs. "That's a good thing, kid. Means you didn't lose your fight."

"I'm not sure I can." I mutter, briefly looking at the doctor. He nods, as if he understands.

"Well, I think we're ready to get started. You okay with those two being in here?"

I look over at my brother and the Chief, and smile. "Yeah. I trust them."

"Good. Okay. I have a few questions. If there are any you don't feel comfortable answering yet, just let me know. We can always hit those when you're ready." I nod in understanding. "Perfect. Now, you were down there for four days. I'm sure you've been told the air was toxic, yes?"

"That's right." My brother breathes in sharply, and I give him a comforting look. "I ripped up my flannel and covered my face. It was a short-term solution, but it worked."

"For the most part."

"What does that mean?" Hopper asks, arms crossed. "Why weren't Veronica or her mom told about this?"

"We didn't have the data yet to tell our young Ms. Henderson. As for Mrs. Henderson, we're not at liberty to discuss these findings with her, or else we'd be going against the contract."

"How bad is it? Is it like cancer? Leia's gonna be fine, right? Because our uncle got lung cancer, but that was because he's a smoker. Do you smoke anymore, Leia? Because if you do, I'm gonna beat the shit out of you! You said you'd stop!" Dustin warns.

I blink, Hopper rubs his hand over his face - he did catch me smoking a few times, but telling me off would be hypocritical so he let me go. Dr. Owens laughs, genuinely amused by my brother.

"No, kid. It isn't lung cancer. The air's toxic down there, like we said. And while her makeshift mask worked, the stuff still came in. The doctors who work for us took great care in cleaning her, but the fact is some particles latched onto her."

"So what does that mean?" I ask, folding my arms. "Am I some sort of mutant?"

"Sweet, that'd be so cool."

"Dustin." I warn.

Dr. Owens moves around in his spinning chair. "The problem is, the only other known survivor is Mr. Byers. Both of you were found in different shapes, and we have yet to get a good look at him. This is why we need you to come in once a week, for observation. If anything drastic happens, if you have any episodes of some kind, you need to come in."

"So you can run more tests." It isn't a question.

"I'm not going to lie to you. We will be running tests. And you are here for us to learn more about that world. But this is also to make sure nothing else happens to you." I nod at his words, and briefly glance over at Hopper. He gives me a small shrug, but the hand nears his gun relaxes a bit. "Now, I'm sure you've spoken about post-traumatic stress. You have a psychiatrist you see, yes?"

"God, the government really does spy on its people." I grumble, and Dr. Owens snorts.

"Yeah. We do." He doesn't offer apologies or anything like that, he just continues. "While we're all still learning more about this disorder, it's important you know this is a common thing. Plenty of veterans suffer from it after returning home. This, coupled with you anxiety and depression, means you're probably having a difficult time sleeping. Is that a true assessment?"

I nod, picking at the skin around my fingers. "Yeah."

"So, have you found a technique that works for you at night?"

I look into his eyes, trying not to picture my brother's face. "Yeah. I just don't sleep. Because when I do, all I see is the damn Upside Down. Even now, part of me thinks I'm still trapped there. Like I'm gonna turn a corner and suddenly vines will shoot out and snatch me, and the Demogorgon will make a yummy meal out of me."

"Demogorgon?"

"The monster. You know, the one that got out after y'all found a way to open the gate. Newsflash, it wasn't actually the little girl's fault. None of this shit would've happened if Brenner and his buddies left shit alone." I gripe, body tensing.

"Sis, hey, it's okay."

"No, Dustin, it isn't okay." I swivel my head to look at him. "Nothing is okay. I'm tired of people trying to make everything okay!" I shout, then bite my lip. "Sorry, I'm sorry. I didn't mean to yell."

"Veronica, it's fine. I get it. I'm not mad." He reassures me, pulling up a chair to sit next to me and carefully holding my right hand. "You're right, okay? You went through some shit no one else could really understand, except Will. But you're safe now, okay?"

"I don't feel like I am, though." I glance away from him and stare back at the concerned Dr. Owens. "I can feel it. In my bones. The Upside Down. Maybe it's PTSD, maybe it's whatever was in the air and got into me."

He nods. "Something for us to monitor, then. And we will. But you're going to have to work with us, Veronica. We can help each other."

I breathe out and nod. "Okay."

"Good. So, tell me about the terrain..."

As Dr. Owens asks his questions and I answer a few, my body doesn't relax. I remain tense, nervous. The air seems thinner, almost, and if I squint I can see the weird particles from the Upside Down floating in front of me.

And while Hopper is driving us away from the Lab, I only have one thought on my mind.

*I am not okay.*

## 8. Insomnia, Birthdays, and Holidays, Oh My

Hi all, and welcome to my *Stranger Things* Steve Harrington/OC story! It's been a long, long time coming. Seriously. Since 2017 long.

In this story, we've got the Ice Queen of Hawkins, the older-but-shorter-by-season 2 sister of Dustin Henderson, because he deserves an older sibling. She's Veronica, and even though *Heathers* came out in 1989 I've taken the liberty of borrowing some of my favorite quotes because *Winona Ryder Easter Eggs*. Seriously, I cannot overstate my love for that movie. Anyway, there's more of a backstory for the Henderson family, including adding the dad to the "asshole fathers club", co-president with Lonnie Byers, the prick. Expect explicit language because, hello, *Stranger Things* isn't known for censoring language.

Fair warning, while this is a Steve/OC fic, the season 2 part will include Billy/OC, but not for long. I promise. He's a great character, but he's a dick until he isn't. Just wanted to get that out of the way. Because again, he's a dick. And don't worry, his S2 behavior does not go unchecked by Veronica, so there won't be any sweeping his choices under the rug. However, I'm also treating their relationship a bit like Jackson Whittemore and Lydia Martin's from *Teen Wolf*, especially with the later outcome. And there will also be inbetween chapters between ST 1 and ST 2, then ST 2 and ST 3, adding some more things as well as a deeper dive into how Max and Billy's relationship changes, because let's be honest that wasn't really commented on in ST 3, and I'd like to see it. But this will not be a Billy Hargrove/OC endgame story. Not like that.

Woohoo! I'm back with the 8th chapter of my little story. Thank you to everyone for sticking with me, and loving what I've written! It honestly means so much to me. Thank you for loving this story and Veronica Henderson. She's truly special to me, so the fact she's had such a warm (ironic given her nickname) reception is so amazing! I've definitely fallen in love with this fic while writing it, but I encourage you to check out my other



works whenever I don't get in an update - if I'm not writing for this one, I'm writing for another story. This chapter's long and literally took forever, so thank you for being so patient!

Alright. This chapter is basically a collection of holidays (as you may have guessed from the chapter title). As her 16th falls on Thanksgiving of 1983 we'll get the birthday/Thanksgiving with her and her family, then a "surprise", and then I wrap it all up in a pretty bow with Christmas Eve (where S1 ends). As seen in the previous chapter, there's also something going on with our Ice Queen thanks to the Upside Down, which gets explored fully a little more down the line, but is touched on here. There will be a couple of cute Steve and Veronica scenes, Veronica with Nancy, Veronica with Jonathan, and Veronica with the kiddos. As we saw in the last chapter, Veronica has accepted the Stancy relationship and isn't the kind of person to do anything to tear them apart. There are obviously moments between Steve and Veronica, but nothing that disrespects Nancy (no matter how we feel about Nancy's relationship with Steve). But these are two people who have become close friends thanks to shared trauma, and clearly care about each other but were too dumbass to act on it before Stancy happened. I don't like pitting women against each other for the sake of giving two girls who are now basically sisters boy drama, because that negates the relationship they've created. Just so everyone knows. The "Steve and Veronica/Steronica" relationship mirrors Jancy - friends, but clearly meant to be something more. "Love is a journey" and all that.

And can I just say, I'm so excited for what I have coming up in this fic for my OC and Steve? Because I do. Also, a warning: there is are several mentions of the Vietnam War here, as I've made more of a backstory for Robert Henderson, to kind of draw a parallel between him and Veronica, since they were so close before his affair. It doesn't get political and isn't meant to glorify war, but I just wanted everyone to know that it's mentioned. The whole Vietnam War parallel will also be applied to Hopper and Veronica later on ("Safe and Smart") as Hopper is canonically an army vet.

Enjoy the story! I only own Veronica.

Also, I'm considering doing a Billy Hargrove/OC fic since I'm taking a hiatus on the other stories (not this one). Basically it would be Billy Hargrove if he'd been raised by his mom instead, and she married Max's dad, and the four of them moved to Hawkins. Like, a different take on Billy - nicer, not a dick, *nicer*. He'd still have those memories of his dad but he'd have thankfully gone down another path (so OOC/non-canon Billy), and would be still distrustful of father-figures/male authority due to trauma Neil caused. They'd still move to Indiana because Max's grandma lives there, and since she's getting older the family wants to take care of her? Billy would be angry they had to move to Hawkins, so he'd still be a bit of an asshole, but not 100% a dick. And the OC would be Four, so Jane's "sister". I'm kind of interested in writing it, but let me know what y'all think!

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Robert Henderson fought in Vietnam. My late grandfather, a man my dad often described as "a barbarian" was a WWII Air Force vet. Old Michael Henderson forced my dad to sign up right after he graduated high school, just like he did. Because no son of his would be drafted before volunteering to fight. Dad became a pilot, flew high and fast, dropping bombs and shooting down planes. He fought for three years, until he blocked a hit meant for his wingman and ejected himself out of his crashing bird. Only to be shot in the arm, thigh, and a bullet to graze side. Luckily for his future children, a medic got him to safety. He was honorably discharged, but most importantly he eventually made a full recovery. He made it back home, he married his girlfriend, he went to college, and they had me.

But while Robert Henderson left Vietnam, Vietnam didn't leave him. Not for awhile, anyway. There'd be times in the woods, where he'd just freeze up and peer into the bushes, waiting for something to come out. If we were walking in a particularly rocky area, he'd only look down as he created a safe path, yelling at me to follow every step he took. For awhile, when I was too young to know what happened to him, I'd just roll my eyes at his overprotectiveness. But it wasn't until the war ended in 1975 that my mom told me his story. I stopped rolling my eyes after that. I started getting out of bed when I'd hear him moving around in the middle of the night, and we'd drink a glass of warm milk together with only the living room lamp

turned on. He'd read *The Merry Adventures of Robin Hood* to me, and little by little would tell me stories about his fallen friends. There was Dex, wild whenever they were back at camp, wrestling with their buddies and winning every drinking game. But when it came to flying, dad had never seen a more focused person in his life. There was Marty. Like my grandpa, Marty's father was an Air Force pilot in WWII. He also made his son enlist, to follow in his footsteps. He wasn't great in the sky, but he was always ready to protect a friend. Evan hated clowns, but had no problem waving dangerous spiders around in front of the others. None of them made it home.

I guess that's something else my dad and I share, now. We were the only one of our friends to survive. We made it home, trauma and all. If my dad were here, I'd have someone to talk to about what I'm feeling. How I can't sleep, because when I close my eyes I'm still in my room but I'm wrapped in wriggling vines. How my medication is barely helping me hold it together. How smoking a few cigs a day keeps the shakes away.

But my dad isn't here, and I'm not ready to talk to him. So for now I just sit in bed, staring out my window, and watch as the world outside becomes covered in white powder. I slept for three hours last night - which is progress - but I woke up at 2 am and have been sitting in the same position ever since, plastered foot elevated on a couple decorative pillows and my thick comforter pulled up to my chest. My bedside lamp was the first thing I had clicked on when my eyes burst open, the vines once surrounding my room suddenly gone. I don't know if I'm dreaming, or really seeing this shit, but I've never been this scared of my own mind before, including when I was first hit with anxiety and depression. My goddamn brain is playing tricks on me, and even though I've always considered the woods my home, my stomach is full of dread as I stare at the thick trees just outside my window. Still, I can't look away. What if I do, and I miss something dangerous?

There's a knock on my door, breaking me from my thoughts. "Sweetheart, can we come in?"

"Yeah! Yes." I clear my throat, a little jumpy. The handle turns and my door opens to reveal my mom and brother, Dustin holding up a blueberry muffin with a lit candle.

"Happy Birthday!" He shouts, nearly blowing out the candle. "You're finally 16! You're ancient! It's okay, though, you'll always be my little shit."

"Dusty!" My mom scolds, but she keeps smiling at me. "Oh, dumpling. Happy Birthday!"

"Thanks, you guys." I smile back, the first relaxed one I've had in nearly two weeks. My mom pulls me into one of her world famous hugs, nearly knocking my brother over. He stumbles and makes faces at me, and I flip him off.

"Veronica, you better not be showing any rude gestures to your brother!" I instantly lower my finger.

"Sorry."

She scoffs and hits my shoulder, straightening up. "Oh, what am I going to do with you two?"

"Love us?" I offer, smirking.

"Sell one of us for another cat." Dustin says, yelping as he dodges my mom's head slap.

"Dusty!"

"Sorry! Shit."

"Dustin. Henderson. If you don't watch your language, you aren't getting any dessert tonight!"

He instantly pales, and thrusts out my surprisingly still-lit muffin. "Dearest sister. Milady most fair. Do us the honor of blowing out thy candle."

I do my best to channel Erica Sinclair. "I will when you stop talking like a nerd, nerd." But then I ruffle his thick curls and blow out my candle, making a wish as I close my eyes.

*I wish El was alive.*

My room is filled with my mom and brother's cheers, and I open my eyes to see my Claudia Henderson removing the candle from the muffin and offering the baked good to me. I take it, and uncaring of the crumbles getting on my bed - stuff half of it into my mouth.

What can I say? I've got a serious love for blueberry muffins.

As I chew, my brother sits by my feet and plays with my comforter. My mom starts talking about what's for dinner - like I can't smell the cranberries, pumpkin pie, and turkey from my open door. "Oh, I completely forgot to tell you. When I ran out last night to pick up some last minute items, I ran into your friend - Steve Harrington, right?" I blink and swallow my last bite, nodding curiously.

"Yeah."

"Such a nice young man. I went to school with his parents, and he looks like a perfect mix of the two of them! Anyways, the poor boy was mulling over some frozen dinners. We got to talking about his plans for today, and when he told me his parents were out of town for the holidays, well, you know me, dear. I couldn't stand the idea of him all alone and eating those disgusting meals!"

I start to panic a bit, knowing what she decided to do. "Mom -"

"So, he will be coming over today. Besides, I'll need an extra set of hands now. It's alright that I invited him, yes?"

"Of course. Yeah, um. I'm going to go... take a bath. Yeah."

"Okay. Dusty and I will be in the kitchen. Don't forget to wrap your leg!" My mom tells me, my brother making faces at my red cheeks until I throw one of my pillows at him.

Steven Harrington is coming over. For Thanksgiving. And my birthday. He isn't going to his girlfriend's house. He's coming here. Oh, God, I'm going to have to dress nice, now. Not too nice, obviously. He's not mine to impress, no matter how much I may wish he was.

See, that's the problem with Harrington getting all heroic on us. Now I can't use "he's a dick" as a reason to pretend to ignore my giant-ass

crush on him. Well, it's deeper than a crush. But he's dating someone I now consider a sister. And he's so happy with her, and I think she's happy with him. I'm not happy, but I still have Jonathan.

Jesus Christ.

Suddenly, I start to giggle. And my giggles soon morph into laughter. Why? Because, for the first time in two weeks, my problem isn't an interdimensional monster. It's just simple teenage drama.

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I'm nervously tapping my fingers against my knee, Mews curled up as far away from me on the couch as possible, occasionally hissing when my fidgeting makes her cushion bounce. Knowing it's completely ridiculous but doing it anyway, I poke my tongue out at the cat. Mews just growls and nuzzles back into her paws.

My mom's in the kitchen, still cooking. Pots and pans bang against each other, and the house just get warmer by the second. A good warm. *Homey*. It's a quiet birthday, too, which is nice. It's what I need, after almost dying in the Upside Down.

Yet another commercial comes on, breaking the news cycle. I take another sip from my third cup of coffee, courtesy of Dustin. He insisted on treating me like the queen I am, so who was I to stop him? Happy Birthday to me.

Speaking of Dustin, he's busy grumbling under his breath as he sets the usually unused dining room table. He keeps adjusting the cuffs of his powder blue dress shirt. His exact words to me were, "I can't believe we have to look nice just because Steve Harrington is coming over. This is bullshit." I only laughed and ruffled his hair once more, ignoring his teasing when I emerged from my room wearing the only nice dress I have. It's lace, green to match my eyes, and comes down to my knees. Thick straps rest just off my shoulders, and it's almost backless. It's really the only fancy thing about me. My feet are bare for obvious reasons, my hair is just as curly as it was when I woke up in the hospital, but tied in a loose low bun. My makeup's light, as usual. So I don't feel like I've put up some facade. I still look like me. Not that a facade could ever work, when it comes to Steve. Even when we were arguing at school, I could tell he saw who I really am.

That's what scared me, what kept me fighting back. At the time, I didn't want the "real me" to be seen. The Ice Queen, as far as the rest of my classmates were concerned, is the only version of Veronica Leigh Henderson that exists. Honestly, I'm fine with people still believing that. But it's also nice that I have friends who tell me when it's okay to stop pretending.

Friends who call me, say, just after I've gotten out of the bath, in the middle of me still panicking about stupid teenage girl shit.

*"Honey, phone call for you!" My mom yells, and I tighten my robe before crutching into the living room. She gives me a smile and passes me the receiver.*

*"Hello?"*

*"Happy Birthday to you, Happy Birthday to you. Happy Birthday to Ver the rockstar, Happy Birthday to you!" I laugh tearfully at the off-key song, then wipe under my eyes. "Damn, you're finally 16. That means I can stop driving you around at night."*

*"Johnny, I've got, like, four more weeks with this stupid cast. You're still going to be driving me around."*

*"Well, you know, it's the principle of the matter, Veronica."*

*I snort at his words, finger wrapping the phone cord around itself. "Yeah, yeah. Happy Thanksgiving, buddy."*

*"You too. You open any presents yet?"*

*"No, not yet. Just got out of the bath."*

*"It's one in the afternoon."*

*"Yeah, well, I'm currently indisposed. How's Will?"*

*"He's good. The doctor said he should be able to go home in a few days. I just stepped out to call you, then I'm back on visitor duty so mom can pick up something that isn't crawling out of the hospital cafeteria. She said to wish you a Happy Birthday, by the way."*

*"Give her a hug for me, okay?" He senses me about to say goodbye, and stops me.*

*"Wait, I'm not done. How are you? Did you sleep okay?"*

*"I'm fine, Jonathan." I try to keep my voice steady and cool. "It's gotten easier to sleep."*

*"Don't lie to me."*

*"I'm not -"*

*"I've known you basically my whole life, Veronica. I can tell when you're lying. You don't have to pretend, not with me. I'm not going to let you pretend anymore."*

*"Yeah, fine. Whatever." I huff. "I didn't really sleep. I still, you know."*

*"Yeah. I get it." He breathes out, and I know he's running his hand through his hair. "No one expects you to be okay, you know?"*

*"I know."*

*"Good. Listen, the doctor's heading back to Will's room. Have a good birthday, okay? I'll see you soon."*

*"Happy Thanksgiving. Tell Will and your mom I love them."*

*"I will. Same for your mom and Dustin. Happy Thanksgiving!" The line beeps, signalling that my best friend hung up, so I do the same.*

*But before I can even head back to my room and get dressed, the phone rings once more. I sigh and pick it up, nearly dropping it when a particularly shrill "Happy Birthday!" is screeched into my ear.*

*"Holy shit!" I shriek back, fumbling with the receiver.*

*"Sorry! Sorry, just, you know, it's your birthday!"*

*I snort. "Jesus, Nancy, my brother was quieter than you, and he's a spaz."*

*"Hey!" My brother whines from the kitchen, and I scrunch my nose at him.*



*"Dustin isn't so bad."*

*"Aw, Nancy." I pretend to wipe a tear from my eyes, sniffing so she can hear the action. "That's so sweet."*

*"Yeah, yeah. Shut it. I was thinking, since we obviously can't hang out today, want to go for strawberry milkshakes this Saturday? Maybe catch a movie? All my treat."*

*"Sure. If you promise we can pour Milk Duds into our popcorn."*

*"Ew, gross."*

*"Actually, it's not. It's salty and sweet!" I correct Nancy. She snorts on the other end of the line.*

*"You hang out with your little brother too much, Vera."*

*I roll my eyes. "Yeah, yeah. And before you ask, yes, I'm okay. No, I didn't really sleep."*

*"How did you -"*

*"Just got off the phone with Jonathan."*

*"Ah, that explains the busy line. You two are worse than my mom."*

*"You take that back!"*

*"Absolutely not." She sasses. "Okay. You'll tell me if anything gets worse, yeah? You won't hide it?"*

*"I'm pretty sure you guys have figured me out, so I'll probably try to. But I'll fail."*

*"Look at you, finally learning you can't bullshit us."*

*"Watch your damn language."*

*"You first, Veronica." We both laugh, and I unwind the chord from my finger. "Alright, I need to help my mom. You know my dad's useless."*

*"Aw, I'm sure Ted Wheeler has some redeeming qualities."*

*"Oh, shut up. Okay, I love you girl."*

*"Love you, too."*

*I can hear Karen Wheeler yelling from the other end of the line, and can almost see Nancy rolling her eyes in irritation. "Crap, I've got to go. Happy Birthday!"*

*"Happy Thanksgiving!" The line beeps so I hang up, then realize I never got the chance to tell her about Steve.*

*And I thought the Upside Down was stressful.*

The doorbell ringing breaks me from my thoughts, and I instantly straighten up, grabbing for my crutches. "Don't worry, sweetheart, I'll get the door!" My mom calls, carefully wiping her hands on her apron as she hustles to the front door. "Welcome, Steve!" She greets, the open doorway revealing a strangely nervous Steve Harrington, holding two bouquets - one definitely Thanksgiving themed, with yellow, burgundy, and red flowers tied in an orange bow. The other is much smaller, but nonetheless beautiful. The smell gives them away, immediately before the shape and pure color.

Gardenias, my favorite. Hell, I love them so much I insist on my mom only buying me perfumes with their scent. They're just so... calming. And they mean so many different things: trust, hope, purity, dreams, friendship, protection. A secret love, untold. You're lovely.

He steps inside, and my mom closes the door behind him, locking up. "Thanks, Mrs. Henderson. I, uh, got these for you. As a thank you. For, you know, letting me intrude on your family dinner and Veronica's birthday." He holds out the Thanksgiving bouquet, and my mother smiles even brighter, pulling the surprised teen into a hug.

"Oh, it's no intrusion, Steve! I'm going to put these in water." She releases him then turns to face the dining room. "Dusty! Our guest is here!" She doesn't seem to notice the way Steve jumps at her volume change, only watches in amazement as the warm, curvaceous woman walk towards the kitchen, whistling for Mews to follow her. The cat stretches and jumps off the couch, giving me one last hiss before *brushing her head on Steve's legs* and prancing after my mom.

*Wow. That cat really does only hate me.*

Steve snorts at the look on my face, then awkwardly shuffles towards me. I start to get up, and he rolls his eyes. "Roni, please, it'll take you forever to get up. Sit down. Jesus."

"Yes, mom." I stick my tongue out at him, but move over to the side so he can sit next to me. He does, removing his jacket in the process and carefully folding it over the back of the couch.

"You're hilarious, Roni. Seriously. A world class comedian."

"You say the sweetest things." I clutch at my heart, widening my eyes even more. "Really. You make me feel all warm and fuzzy inside."

If only he knew.

Steve smiles, though, then awkwardly hands me the bouquet. "Oh, these are for you. Obviously. I mean, if they were for your mom, I would have -"

"Steven." He nods, and I smile gratefully, carefully holding the gardenias up to my nose to take a deep breath. "Thank you. These are my favorite."

"I know."

I look over at him, eyebrow raised. He shrugs. "I overheard you talking about them to Barb, last year. During the Homecoming dance. You were complaining about all the roses."

"Roses are so overdone." I comment, wrinkling my nose. "Like, find another flower."

He snorts. "Yeah. That's exactly what you said. And, um, you always smell good. Sweet. I mean... yeah. Anyway, Nancy came to school smelling a bit like you last week, after your sleepover. I asked her what it was, and she told me it was your gardenia perfume. So, I figured you probably still loved them. Happy Birthday, Roni."

I bite my lip and look down at the bouquet, hiding my blush under my blonde curls. "Thanks. I mean it. These are beautiful."

"Yeah. I guess I see why you love them so much."

"Oh, sweetheart, let me put these in your room!" My mom cries out, making us both look up as she excitedly returns, holding her hands out to take the flowers. I smile at her eagerness and hand them over, and she walks away mumbling happily to herself.

As she's walking away, my brother walks in and forces himself into the spot between Steve and I, giving the older male a distrusting look. I mean, I can assume it's distrusting because those are his distrusting shoulders. "So, Steve. Can I call you Steve?"

Steve looks over my little brother's head, giving me a confused look. I only smirk and shrug, deciding to stay neutral. "Uh, yes. Because that's my name."

"Well, Steve, I'm Dustin. Veronica's little brother."

"I figured." He answers, still confused.

"As her younger brother, she often drives me to school. And takes me back home. Which means we spend, on average, twenty minutes in the car together. Ten there, ten back. And during those twenty minutes, we talk."

"I'd be surprised if you didn't."

"Shh, I'm talking." I snort, but am way too amused by my brother to stop it. Steve just looks offended. "Now, I've heard a lot of stories about you, and your old pals. Like how you would seek her out everyday, to try and mess with her." I stop smiling, simply watching my brother in awe at how strong his voice is as he talks to the much larger male. "I know you used to tell her she wasn't as smart as she thought, that people stayed clear of her cause they didn't want to catch her 'weird'. I know you called her 'blonde Gremlin'. I know you would just stand by and watch her defend herself from those assholes." Steve's face is starting to fall, hazel eyes a little sadder. "She also told me what you said to her, after she got back from the Upside Down." He says quietly, but mom is too busy clattering away in the kitchen to hear us.

I look down at my brother, lost. "Hang on, I never -"

"Yes, actually, you did. When you took your painkillers your first night home." He looks at me with a pained expression, like somehow Steve's words hurt him, not me. Before I can comment, Dustin turns back to Steve, who's biting his lip. "You told my sister - the best person in the world, by the way, who deserves way better than the shit she gets -"

"Language, Dusty."

He shushes me. "Yeah, whatever. I learned it all from you." He responds, not once looking away from Steve. "You told her she was nothing. You said that it was Barb who should have been let go, not her. You looked Veronica in the eyes and told her that, like she doesn't matter. Like her dying wouldn't have destroyed anyone."

"Dustin -"

"Leia, no. It's not okay. I don't care. You're my big sister, and I don't like you hurt. Even if the person who hurt you suddenly decides you're cool enough to be friends with." Dustin scowls up at me.

I smile back, teary. "Oh, kiddo. Yeah, it hurt. But I said some pretty awful stuff to Steve. Things I didn't mean. Just like he didn't mean what he said." Dustin keeps frowning. "We were both hurting, for very different reasons. I promise you, though, Steve isn't a bad guy. He isn't even a bad person. He was just lost, like me." My eyes flick up to Steve, who's watching me with a surprisingly unreadable expression. I look back down at Dustin. "D, as much as I complained about the arguing, Steve was never the real problem. Yeah, he was a dick, but... he always had some redeemable qualities. Like, even though they didn't deserve it, he always took care of Carol and Tommy H. The day after I took you home, he asked how you were. The dumbass has a big heart, he just pretended he didn't."

"Like how you pretend?" He whispers, and I nod, pushing some curls out of his eyes.

"Yeah."

Dustin sighs. "Fine." Then he turns back around, looking up at Steve. "Whatever. I'll let it go. But the minute you start acting like a dick to my sister, it won't be her arrows that you're afraid of. It'll be me." With that he holds out his hand, and after a few seconds Steve shakes the offered limb. Dustin jumps up and gives us both a big, gap-filled smile. "Cool. I'm going to help mom."

"I could -" Just as Steve's standing up, my mom takes a quick break from her cooking. She waves her wooden spoon at him.

"No, no. You're the guest! Besides, someone needs to keep my restless daughter entertained."

I roll my eyes but smile nonetheless, then notice how stiff Steve is. "Hey. Why don't you come to my room?"

Steve shrugs and stands again, carefully helping me to my feet and handing me my crutches. I lead him past the kitchen and down the hall, carefully opening the door. I enter nervously, realizing it's not as neat as it usually is. Thank God my laundry's hidden in its basket. Small miracles, I guess.

I sit down on the bed and fold my right leg under me, left one hanging off the bed. I carefully pick at my lace dress, the soft material fanned around me like a princess's. I look soft, thawed. Earthy.

Steve sits down next to me, looking around my room. "You know, I wasn't expecting it to look so..."

"So, what?" I ask, a little anxious.

"Warm." He finally answers, looking down at me. "I guess I thought there'd be, like, snowflake wallpaper, at least."

I snort. "I'm only the Ice Queen at school. Here, I'm just Veronica. Big sister of a crazy-overprotective nerd."

"He's a good kid." I tilt my head. "Dustin. But I guess having you for a sister made that possible."

"The credit goes to my mom, really. She's, well, she's the best. I know

most teen girls don't get along with their mother's, but something about Claudia Henderson makes it impossible to fight with her." I openly admit, never shy about how much I love my mom. "I mean, she can be a little overbearing sometimes. And she has the worst taste in pets."

He smirks. "Yeah, I saw that. You don't like your cat?"

"Mews isn't mine. She's my mom's. And it's a mutual dislike, by the way."

"So what pet would you want?" Steve asks me, turning his body so his back is to the door. I carefully twist as well, propping my back up against the headboard and stretching my left leg out diagonally.

I bite my lip, staring off into space. "A dog. A big one."

"Wow, specific. I can tell you really put a lot of thought into this." He sasses, tone much lighter than any time we would argue at school, but it's still familiar. God, I love bantering with Steve.

So I roll my eyes. "Yeah, yeah. I have, though." I smile at him. "I want a Bernese Mountain Dog."

"Yeah, I don't know what that is."

I laugh kindly. "They're big, and fluffy, with black, white, and brown furry. They love the outdoors, and the amount of energy they have rivals my brother's. But they're also watchdogs. They protect, and they're just so friendly." I shrug. "Mom has Mews, and Dustin has Yurtle the Turtle."

"Yurtle the Turtle?" Steve starts to laugh, and I join him, nodding. "Oh my God, that's great."

"I know. D's very proud of his pet-naming skills."

We calm down, and Steve smiles softly at me. "What would you name your dog? If you got one. And would it be a boy, or a girl?"

"I honestly don't care. I just want one. So badly. I ask for one, every year. I have since I was nine. Dad always promised he'd get me one,

but... well, dad promised a lot of things." I shake my head. "Sorry. Um, names. I actually never thought about them, before. I guess I always figured I'd decide when I met them. Like, what if I fell in love with a name but it doesn't match who they are?"

Steve nods. "Yeah. I mean, life never happens according to plan, right? Things always change." I smile at him, and he gives me a confused look. "What?"

"That's the wisest thing I've ever heard."

"Heard at all? Or heard me say?"

"At all. You're smarter than you give yourself credit for."

He snorts. "No, I'm not. I just eat a lot of fortune cookies."

I tilt my head and lean forward to rest my chin on my hands. "Why do you do that?"

"Do what?" He asks, shifting around.

"Put yourself down like that. Like you aren't better than you pretend."

"Yeah, you're one to talk." He says defensively, and I nod.

"I know. But we're not talking about me right now. We're talking about you." I gently tell him. "Look, we're friends now. We've known each other for years. I know we only started talking my freshman year, but we would pass each other all the time in elementary and middle school. How much time did we waste ignoring the other's existence, only to spend a little over a year arguing over stupid shit?"

"Yeah, I know. I'm sorry. About everything. All of it."

"I'm sorry, too. So, now that we are friends, can you please do me a favor and see yourself in a better way?"

"You never did before." He tells me, but it isn't in a brutal tone. It's accepting.

I shake my head, though. "That's not true. I mean, yeah, you were a



dick. But I never thought you were just that. And you proved yourself, when we were fighting the Demogorgon. When you came to the Byers house to apologize to Jonathan in the first place. And you keep proving yourself in how you treat Nancy. And, uh, speaking of Nancy. Don't take this the wrong way, but why are you here? Why aren't you with her?"

"I was going to ask her if I could go over, originally. But then I ran into your mom, and I didn't want you to spend your birthday without a friend. I figured I'd have a better time here than at the Wheelers. At least your mom won't be giving me the 'third degree'."

"Right, I'm the safer choice."

"I didn't say that, Roni. I, well, if you think that's what I meant, I'm sorry, but, uh-"

"Steven, relax. I was just messing with you. Thanks." He nods and looks away. "Hey." I lean forward and poke his bicep, and he looks at me. "I mean it. Thank you. I... I'm trying to be more honest, you know? To stop hiding things." He nods, patiently waiting for me to get to the point. "The truth is, I'm not okay. At all. I don't want to worry Nancy or Jonathan, because they've been, well, I know they care about me a lot. But it's a little smothering. You know? Like with my mom. And I get it, but, I spent four days running away from things that could choke me to death. I couldn't breathe. And even after I got out, I still can't." I breathe out through my nose and look around my room, a little wildly. "It's like I never really left."

"What do you mean?" I blink owlishly, still looking at the walls. "Hey, Roni. Look at me." I feel the bed moving a bit and close my eyes. When I open them I'm alone, surrounded by white flecks and slimy vines. I whimper and blink again, the Upside Down gone and two large hands on my smaller shoulders. "Roni?"

"I think I'm losing my mind." I finally admit out loud, eyes flicking so I'm staring directly into Steve's. He bites his lip. "Sometimes, a lot of the time, when I blink I'm back in that hellhole. And then I blink again, and I'm back. It happens at school, at home. It's worse if I step too close to the woods. I'm scared of the woods now, Steve. Me. I grew up in them, and I'm scared." I breathe in, then out. "My shrink

says I have PTSD, and the guy I see when I have my appointment, he agreed."

"Is that all the, uh, doc said?" Steve asks me. I nod. I'm not ready to talk about what the lab is monitoring me for. Not yet, at least. Not with people who weren't there.

"Yeah. That's it." He lets out a breath and moves back to his original spot. "Just, can you not tell Nancy yet? Or Jonathan?"

"Hey, it's your secret. I won't say anything." He holds up his pinky and I snort in disbelief, but take it nonetheless. "Is your mom sure she's okay cooking without some help?"

"Hey, Dustin's not bad." He's not good, either. Kid nearly burned water the other day.

"Yeah, well, I make some mean mashed potatoes and stuffing. I kind of had to learn how to make edible meals."

"If you can cook, why were you buying frozen meals?" I ask him, picking at my comforter.

He snorts, crossing his arms. "What's the point in cooking a whole feast if it's just you alone in your castle?" He poses, then glances at me. "There isn't one. Besides, it'd only -"

"Remind you of a time when they were there." I finish for him, briefly thinking about my dad. "I get it. I was just -"

"Curious. I know. It's okay, Veronica."

"Well, if you want, you can make mashed potatoes and stuffing next year." I offer him, then bite my lip.

He just blinks at me. "Next year?"

I try to play it off, and it works. "Yeah, you know, if your parents screw off again and leave you on your own. 'Thanksgiving with the Henderson's' can be your new tradition."

He grins, reminding me a bit like an overly-excited puppy. It's

adorable. "You know, Roni, that doesn't sound too bad."

I grin back and perk up a bit, just in time for my mom to call us out for dinner. "Come on. Let's kick off this new tradition." I say, and move to get up. Steve is faster, though, and helps me get off my bed, steadying me as I get my crutches in place. And as we follow the delicious smells wafting around the house, I start to feel a little less frozen.

---

I smile as Dustin sits next to me, groaning about how much dinner he ate and leaning his head on my shoulder. I pat my own food baby, more than satisfied with what I had. It was more than I've eaten the past two weeks, but not enough that anyone has to roll me into the bathroom to kneel before the porcelain throne.

"Jesus Christ, mom can cook." Dustin moans, and I snort, shifting my body around on the couch until I get into the perfect position. My brother grumbles as I do so, but eventually settles down when I'm comfortable.

"You having a good birthday?" He asks me quietly, taking my hand. I smile - even though he can't see it - and watch as Steve helps my mom in the kitchen, laughing in that naturally charming way of his and thanking her as she packs him some leftovers.

"Yeah. I really am." I kiss his forehead and nuzzle our curly hair together, giggling softly at how ticklish the gesture is.

Mom and Steve come in, the latter carrying an armful of wrapped gifts. "So, I was thinking we open presents first, and then we can have dessert." My mom offers, settling into her chair as Steve sets the presents down on the table in front of me. He sits in the chair across from my mom's, leaning back with an eased expression on his face.

I blink, realizing I haven't responded to my mom. "Sounds like a good idea. Dustin's complaining about his poor decision making."

"Hey, I complained to you in confidence!" Dustin pouts, and I nudge him away.

"Yeah, okay. Move." He huffs but does as I command, scooting over a bit so I can carefully open my gifts.

The first few are pretty simple, but nonetheless appreciated. My aunt and uncle who live in Michigan sent me some sweaters that are definitely too pink and scratchy. Dustin wrinkles his nose at them, and my mom hushes his ensuing laughter, reminding him "Payback's a you-know-what!" I simply folded them and set to the side, silently bemoaning the fact that my mom would be sending them pictures. Steve sends me a wink, and I roll my eyes but smile back.

I also get some comics from Dustin that I'm nearly 99% sure I bought him, but it's the thought that counts. My mom got me a few new books.

It isn't until I get to a cylinder-wrapped gift that things become a little more personal. Less "gifts" and more "presents."

I unroll the paper and set it down. The brown cardboard tube it unassuming to most, but I know exactly what it is. I smile when I pull out a painstakingly wrapped quiver, complete with new arrows - practice and hunting tipped ones. My eyes grow wide when I unwrap the tissue, revealing the black leather hip quiver.

"I noticed your old one was all banged up, and Mark said you'd been eyeing that model at work. Do you like it?" My mom asks, clapping her hands together while Mews jumps onto her lap.

I smile and hold up the quiver before removing one of the sharp-tipped arrows, the triangular metal shining in the light. "It's beautiful. And these are perfect. Thank you."

"Well, technically the arrows are from Craig. And the engraving was chosen by Chief Hopper." She points down at the bottom right corner of the hip-quiver, smiling when I see the carefully etched "Robin Hood."

"This is... wow." I whisper.

"Totally badass." Steve says, and I peak over at him, but he's just looking at me.

"Leia, man, you don't know how relieved I am that you opened it. Mom talked about it in October. The secret was killing me."

I snort at how overdramatic my brother is, then ruffle his hair. "Yeah, yeah. We're all proud of you for keeping your mouth shut."

He smacks my hand away, then perks up and hands me a cool box. Seriously, it's fridge-cool. "Um, run out of hiding places?" I ask him, taking it from him as I set the hip-quiver and arrows aside.

"No. These had to be chilled, milady."

"Okay, weirdo." I snort, then calmly rip open the paper. It's a shoe-box, but Dustin doesn't actually have the money to buy shoes, so I know it's not what it seems.

And, as usual, my instincts are correct. The box is filled with Candy - none of that old Halloween shit, actual store-bought candy. I'm talking Three Musketeers, Reese's Peanut Butter Cups, Heath Bars, Sugar Daddy Large Pops, and at the very bottom... nearly a handful of Smarties. The tablets, not the UK version of M&Ms. Yeah, yeah, I know M&Ms came four years after, but still. The good Smarties.

I hold up a roll, carefully turning it in my fingers.

*"Hello. Excuse me? Hey, Smarties!" Someone whispers on my left, and I look up as menacing as possible to see the redhead girl in my English class poking at my desk with her pencil. Something I'd been trying to ignore for almost a minute. The irritant disrupting my brooding is Barbara Holland. I've known her since elementary school, technically, but we didn't really talk. We just ran in different circles, mine being Jonathan and hers being the overachievers destined for far better than Hawkins, Indiana.*

*I place another tablet in my mouth and stare at her, eyebrows raised. "Excuse me?" I ask, expecting her to back off with special thanks to my frozen tone.*

*She only narrows her eyes. "I've known you since we were kids, Veronica. That doesn't work on me."*

*I glare, aggressively chewing on another tablet. "What do you want, Holland?"*

*"Well, Smarties, I wasn't in school yesterday. And I know you take decent notes. Could I borrow them? I'm a little lost right now." She tells me. I just sigh through my nose and pass her the loose notes, sitting back in my chair as I flick through Lord of the Flies. "You really like those, huh?"*

*"They're the best." I mutter, then close my mouth. I've fallen into a social trap - bonding with a classmate.*

*"Eh, the other Smarties are better."*

*Unable to help myself I look at her in shock, eyebrows furrowed and neck forcing my head out at her. "Excuse you?"*

*"You heard me." She whispers, but as usual the rest of the class is ignoring anything that has to do with me. For their sake. What can I say? I've got this school well-trained to fear the Ice Queen.*

*"Take that back."*

*"Don't think I will, Smarties."*

*"Stop calling me that."*

*"Nope."*

*Barbara smiles at me, then leans forward conspiratorially. "By the way, I already had the notes. I just wanted you to have another friend. And, well, I owe you."*

*And it was at that moment, I met the first person - Jonathan not included - who saw through my frozen walls.*

*"Veronica?" I open my eyes - unaware I had closed them in the first place - and see my brother staring at me, a scared expression on his face. Realizing I'm crying, I carefully wipe away the tears. "Oh, shit, I'm sorry. I know... Barb called you... and the nougat saved your life, but I thought you should have your favorite. I'm really sorry, it's too soon, and I -"*

*I pull my brother into a tight hug, smiling. "I love it. So much. Thank you."*

"Yeah, you got it." We break apart and my mom leans forward to squeeze my hand.

"Is that it?"

"No, actually, you have one from the Hollands." I tilt my head in surprise, taking the present from her. "They dropped it off, when they were visiting you. It's from Barb, but you can open it..." I tear apart the wrapping paper, "... when you're ready."

I grin at the hardcover copy of *Lord of the Flies*, and open it to find a folded note. I know I'm going to be a mess when I read it, so I leave it in the sleeve for now and hold the book to my chest.

"Who's ready for dessert?" I ask, smiling around the room before I land on Steve, who's now sitting next to me on the couch and rifling through his coat.

"Wait, hang on, I got you something!" He tells me, then whoops when he finds whatever my present is. "Okay, before you say anything - no, it did not cost a fortune. But if you don't accept it, I'll feel really embarrassed, and no one wants that, okay?"

I just snort but cautiously untie the bow on the small box. I lift up the lid, then gasp. "Oh. Oh my God. Jesus Christ, Steve."

"What is it, dumpling? What'd he get you?" My mom asks, leaning forward. My brother puts his chin on my shoulder, giving us all a low whistle.

"Damn."

I carefully pluck out the small ring. It's simple - if straightened, it'd be an arrow, but it was carefully molded to wrap around the finger. "Oh, that's gorgeous!" My mom announces.

"And totally not necessary. But -" I hold up my finger to stop my mom from scolding me, and smile at Steve. "I really, really like it. So I guess I'm going to have to accept it."

He smiles in relief, then gestures to the ring. "It should fit on your right thumb. I saw it last week at the jewelry store on Main, when

Nancy and I were shopping for you. She figured out your ring-size the night she stayed over and told me, so I could make sure it was perfect. It's only gold filled, but it'll last way longer than a gold plated one. I don't know how I know that, I -" He rambles a bit, and I slide the ring onto my right thumb easily before throwing my arms around him. It's a slightly awkward hug, given our positions, but it's warm and real.

"Thank you. For the flowers, and this. I'm never taking it off."

"Great. That lowers the risk of you losing it." He comments, and I playfully poke him. We release each other and I turn to see my mom watching us, a small smile on her face. She doesn't give me any other kind of look, though, and simply stands.

"Okay! I'm going to get dessert ready. Steve, if you wouldn't mind helping me -"

"Of course, Mrs. Henderson."

"Claudia, dear. You can call me Claudia. Dusty, please pick up the wrapping paper."

My brother doesn't complain. Or at least, he seems to be waiting for our mom to disappear into the kitchen. As soon as both she and Steve are out of sight, he looks up from me from his spot on the ground. "Steve Harrington, huh?"

"No. Besides, he's with Nancy."

He just looks at me, then snorts. "I'm so glad I don't have to deal with relationship bullshit."

"Yeah, wait a year. I'm sure you'll change your tune." I wink at him and he rolls his eyes, moving around the living room.

Dessert is pumpkin pie with 16 candles shoved around. I blow them out, making the same wish I did before. *I wish El was alive.* Between Steve and Dustin, the boys ate almost six slices before calling it quits, my mom packing up a few more slivers for Steve, complaining about him being "too skinny."



He smiles, though, completely content with her words. No parents, big house.

We all walk him to the door, my mom and I hugging him while Dustin just shakes his hand, all tough-guy. Steve just smirks at him and waves as he marches through the snow, backing out of our driveway and onto the plowed road.

Dustin marches off to his room after mom attacks him with kisses, but he doesn't moan about it. He also carefully grabs all my gifts - even the stupid sweaters - and takes them to my room.

I smile as my mom kisses me, warm hands pulling me into a tight hug. When she steps away, though, her somber expression makes me look at her in confusion. She simply brushes blonde curls out of my face. "There's one last gift for you. On your bed. It's from your father."

"Oh."

"He called, earlier, and asked me to wish you a 'Happy Birthday'." I nod. "He said he's respecting your wishes, but didn't want you to think he forgot."

"Thank you." I squeeze her hand, knowing it's probably even harder for her.

She smiles. "I'm so proud of you. My little fighter. Happy Birthday, dumpling."

"Thanks, mama. Goodnight." I kiss her cheek then crutch towards my room, the door open thanks to Dustin.

I close it behind me and crutch over to my desk, smiling at the gardenia resting in a fancy glass vase. Beside the flowers are my gifts, Barb's far away from Steve's bouquet. I smile at Dustin's protective gesture, and briefly open the book to pull out the letter before crutching over to my bed, where a particularly large box is waiting for me.

Plopping down on the marshmallow-like mattress, I open Barb's note first.

*Hey Smarties,*

*Congratulations! You did it! You're finally 16! I mean, you're still short enough to be confused for a middle schooler, but you're two years closer to legally being able to drink. Gone will be your days of drinking illegally. At least you won't be wasting your time at stupid high school parties. There's more to life than that, you know? No one wants to aspire to be like Tommy H and his goons.*

*It also means we have almost two more years of high school, and then we're done with Hawkins High and finally seeing the real world. We'll be in college - you're only fooling yourself if you think Nance and I won't be hounding on you to apply. You're meant for more than this place, Smarties. You always have been. And, hey, archery is an Olympic sport, so when you think you're ready you should totally aim to get in. Get it?*

*I know, I'm hilarious. I learned from the best. Not you. You're not funny, Ice Queen.*

*Okay. I've veered off course. Look, the point of this note is for you to know that no matter where we go in life, no matter what our future holds, you are important to me. I see you for who you really are, Veronica. And that person is amazing. Remember that.*

*I love you,*

*Barb*

I sniffle when I finish, putting the paper aside so my tears don't ruin the carefully penned note. Someone knocks on my door and I try to even my breathing. "Yes?"

"It's me. There are two morons who want to talk to you. Are you okay?" Dustin asks, and I cough to clear my throat.

"Mhmm."

"Okay. I'm coming in, please be decent!" He opens the door and closes it behind him, thankfully not commenting on my blotchy face as he holds up his walkie. "This is Dustin. I'm with Huntress. You can relay your messages now, over."

The walkie crackles. **"Happy Birthday!"** Mike yells. **"Over."**

**"Yeah, what Mike said, but in a way that means more, over!"** Lucas shouts back, and I smile, wiping at my face. **"Because we all know I'm your favorite. Over."**

**"Uh, actually, it's me. Over."** Mike argues.

There's some sort of fight on one of the walkies, but the reason for it soon clicks on their device. **"Listen, nerds, everyone knows I'm her favorite. I am your favorite, right?"** Erica asks, turning her sass to the max as she addresses me. I laugh and take the walkie from Dustin, holding down the button.

**"Yes, Erica. Of course you are. Over."** I shake my head, though, and point at Dustin with a big smile. He smiles back.

**"Good. Here you go, nerd."**

**"Sisters suck. Over."** Lucas complains, having regained control over his walkie.

**"Not Veronica. Over."** Mike is quick to defend.

**"Obviously, Michael."** Lucas growls. **"Over."**

**"Behave, boys. Shouldn't you be going to bed? It's late. Over."** I tell them, smiling when I hear some grumbling from whoever is holding down their button.

**"We just wanted to wish our Huntress a Happy Birthday. God, mom. Over."** Mike announces, and I smile.

**"Well, thank you. And happy Thanksgiving. I love you guys. Over."**

**"We love you too. Over and out."** Lucas tells me.

**"Yeah. Love you. Over and out."** The connection goes dead and I carefully hand the walkie back to my brother.

**"Thanks, D."**

"Yeah. I know it was... today was hard. What's that?" Dustin asks, pointing at the box.

"Oh, um, dad sent me a present."

"You going to open it?"

I shrug, then nod back at my brother. "Not without you, Gimli."

He grins again, and joins me on my bed. Together we rip open the box's tabs, revealing carefully wrapped gifts. The top one is in bubble wrap, and giving Dustin a distrusting look I set it on the bed, opening it open.

"Holy shit."

I nod. "Holy shit."

Previously-carefully enveloped in bubble rests my dad's framed Purple Heart. Tapped carefully to the metal part of the frame is a letter, which I pluck off. I look at Dustin, who gestures for me to open it before pulling out a shiny jacket and showing it to me, impressed.

Dad didn't just send me one memorabilia. He also included one of his most prized possessions - although, it's not really something he can wear anymore considering he isn't exactly in-shape. It's his old flight jacket, in better condition than I ever expected. "C'mon. Maybe the letter will explain his trip down memory lane." Dustin tells me, shrugging.

I sigh but open it anyway, breathing in deeply. Then out.

*"Dear Veronica. Damn, that's too formal. Then again, I've pretty much become a stranger to you these past four years. My fault. Never yours. God, I messed up. I messed up so bad. I hurt your mom, and your brother. And I hurt you. No apology in the world could take back what I did and how you found out. I'm going to spend the rest of my life regretting it. But I won't ever regret those years I spent with you. The camping trips we took. The first time you held a bow. The first time you got a bullseye. How you stood up for Jonathan against Lonnie. Hey, he's my friend, but I'm man enough to recognize he's also a dick. Like me."* I briefly stop reading to look over at Dustin. "Wow. We definitely got our trashmouths from

him."

Dustin laughs, and waves his hand for me to keep reading. *"You were right about everything you said in the hospital. All of it. About trying to buy your love with a new car, and the visits. How I've been forcing you to act like things aren't weird because of me. I messed up, kid. I'm not just a shitty man, I'm a shitty dad. You know, you reminded about something else, too, in the hospital. Not in your words, but in what you accomplished. You're a survivor of your hell, like I was a survivor of my own. We aren't so different, you and I. Not in that sense, anyway. We both made it home. But where I failed to do right by my second chance at life, I know you'll succeed. You lost someone you love. That won't ever go away. But you're strong enough to keep living. To persevere, to move on, to grow. When you look at my Purple Heart, I want you to remember that you're the bravest girl I've ever met. You deserve to live, darling. You're going to keep surviving. And as for the jacket, well, it ain't doing me any good hanging in the back of my closet. I love you, Veronica. And I am so unbelievably proud of you. Always. Dad."* I grin as I read the very end of the page. *"P.S. Tell Dustin he's going to get a cool present when he turns 16, too. And that I love him very much."*

Dustin huffs. "Well, good."

I ruffle his hair, then kiss his cheek. "Alright, D. It's late enough. Go to bed."

"I'm not even -" he yawns, then frowns. "Tired. Whatever. Goodnight. Happy Birthday, love you Leia."

"I love you too, D." Dustin leaves my room, and for the first time all day I'm alone. The fear creeps towards me like thick vines, until I pick up the Purple Heart.

*I'm a survivor. I'm brave. And I deserve to live. That's my new mantra.*

---

I peer up at my companion as I take a sip of the cool, thick liquid, some strawberry syrup coming up through the straw. I swallow and sit back in the booth, cast-foot swinging. "You look happy. Happier." Nancy corrects herself, having finished her rant about Mike trying to get money out of her piggy bank. I raise an eyebrow and take another

sip of my strawberry milkshake, then lean back.

"Yeah?"

"Yes." Nancy insists, reaching over and squeezing my left hand with her right, both of our palms healed, but scarred. "Even if it's just a temporary thing... Vera, it's a good look on you."

I blush and look down. "Thanks. I'm trying, but -"

"It's hard. I know."

"I know you do." I smile at her and watch as she removes her hand to drink from her own glass. "Hey, I talked to Craig. He said he'd be happy to have you join my lessons. If you're still interested in learning how to shoot. I'll probably only be able to give you aiming tips, but -"

"No, no. I want to go. It's something I have to do."

I nod, then take a sip. "You're worried it isn't over, right?"

She breathes in through her nose, looking around warily. "Especially since it's still -"

"Yeah. Open." We both look out the window, as if we can see Hawkins Lab from the little dinner Downtown. "It's worse for me. Going there. It's like a dual dream."

"But you have to go." It isn't said as an order, it's a reluctant understanding.

I give Nancy a sad smile, then bring my good leg up to rest my chin on my knee. The waitress Shelly just snorts as she passes me, but the staff at Sally's Place have known me almost my whole life, and short of me not tipping I can get away with treating Sally's like it's my home. "Exactly. It's a real dilemma."

She snorts at my dry tone then takes another sip, briefly watching a few Hawkins residents moodily walking through the snow. "How was your Thanksgiving? Did your younger brother drop gravy on your lap, too?"

I snort, remembering the story Nancy was all too-quick to tell. "No. He didn't. He did threaten Steve, though."

Nancy laughs and sits up. "Really? Dustin? Steve's twice his size!"

I nod. "Mhmm. Brought up our past and stuff. It was sweet, though. And, you know, I explained that we were both jerks to each other."

"What he said to you, though, at the Hawk -"

"Was understandable. What I said really hurt him. But I don't hold our arguments in the past against him, and I don't think he holds them against me?" I raise an eyebrow for confirmation, and Nancy smiles, taking both my hands this time.

"He doesn't! Really! And you have no idea how glad I am that you and Steve are getting along, now."

I breathe out. "Are you okay? That he came over to mine? Instead of yours?"

She shrugs. "Yeah, of course. I'm the one who told him to accept your mom's offer."

I blink, feeling as though the floor has opened up underneath me and I'm in freefall. "What?"

"Yeah. He called me after he ran into your mom at Big Buy. I said he'd have more fun at your place, since Thanksgiving is literally the worst at mine." She notices my blank stare. "He didn't tell you that?"

"No. He just said he didn't want me to spend my birthday without a friend."

She smiles. "Well, he meant it. If you're concerned he was lying. He said so. Steve just wanted to make sure I was okay with it, and I was. Am." She clarifies. "Our relationship just started, you know? And Thanksgiving is stressful enough without having your family interrogate your boyfriend. I didn't want two of my favorite people to be alone. Especially not my sister."

I smile, a little tearfully, and squeeze her hands. "Thank you."

"Of course. Oh, I forgot to ask - did you like the ring?"

I raise my right thumb and watch the gold filled arrow shine under the fluorescent lights. "Yeah. Thank you, for making sure he got the right size. And for letting him get it for me."

"Why wouldn't I have?"

I give her a confused look. "You're his girlfriend, and he got me a ring?"

"Yeah. One that I knew was meant for you the minute he pointed it out. I'm not like Carol or Tammy."

"That's for damn sure. They're both complete duds."

"The absolute worst."

"Awful." We both stare at each other, then begin to laugh hysterically. Sally's is empty enough that no one is paying attention, everyone else just focusing on getting warm. When we finally quiet down, clutching our aching stomachs, the world seems a little lighter. I'm struck with the realization that it's been nearly two hours since I've seen even a flash of the Upside Down.

I can be better, it can get better.

"I'm glad we got to do this, finally." Nancy says, cheeks flushed. "Went out for strawberry milkshakes."

I smile, but both of our eyes are sad. "Me, too." I raise my glass in the air. "For Barb."

"For Barb." We clink our glasses and take another sip.

"Do you remember in Ms. Cooper's class, when she refused to dissect the frog?"

"Yeah." Nancy smiles at me, her blue eyes far away. "You backed her up. What did you say again?"

"That it went against Barb's religion."



Nancy snorts. "And then you distracted the class with a whole philosophy discussion."

"Mhmm. It was totally worth the week of detention."

Nancy gives me a look. "We weren't even friends, then." I nod. "Not really. It was, what, our third month as freshmen?"

"Second. I think."

She shrugs. "It doesn't matter. You were the Ice Queen with one friend. Barb and I had been close since we were in middle school. I remember being so scared of you those first couple of months in high school."

"And now I'm a traumatized mess, and you're a badass who can handle a gun."

"You're a badass even without a bow. Stop it." I roll my eyes but nod. "That's not the point, though. I was scared, because most of the time I paid attention to you was when you turned cold. Hell, you terrify the seniors on a regular basis. But there you were, probably having only spoken to Barb three times, and you were protecting her. I remember it so damn well. Class had ended, and we were watching you walk through the halls like what you did was no big deal." I can't help but smile as Nancy tells the story. "Barb just turned to me and said 'That's going to be our new friend'. Like, it was so final that I couldn't disagree with her."

I wipe away a few tears. "Two days later she was telling me I need more friends. And, well, that she owed me. Which was true. No one needs to spend longer than a class period with Ms. Cooper."

Nancy laughs, nodding and wiping away her own tears. "God, I know!"

We laugh then look down at our drinks, taking a few sips. "We should do this more. Talk about her. Even though it hurts."

Nancy sighs and looks at me. "You're right. It's just... this is..."

"Hard." I take Nancy's hands this time. "Really hard. But we'll get better."

"Yeah. We will." She clears her throat then gives me a once-over. "You know, I noticed that you're actually wearing makeup. And are a little overdressed for Sally's." My eyes flick over her, knowing she's wearing a pink wool dress, white stockings, and clean winter boots. Nancy snorts, then leans forward on the table, removing her hand from mine so she can cross her arms. "Who told you?"

"Told me what?" I ask, taking a long sip from my milkshake.

"You're a terrible liar." Is all Nancy says, and I send her an offended look.

"Hey!"

"It's true."

"I'm just out of practice. I've spent four years being honest."

"All I'm hearing are excuses." Nancy teases, and I grin, finally conceding.

"Dustin. He sang like a canary." I say in my most mafia-accent, and Nancy groans.

"You're brother sucks." I pout and crumple my napkin, throwing it at her face and smiling like a maniac when it hits her in the center of her eyebrows. Nancy goes a little cross-eyed, then sticks her tongue out at me. "Alright. I deserved that. In all fairness, your brother really is the best."

"Don't you dare forget it." I point at her, but the threat means nothing when I take an extra-long sip from my straw.

"Just do me a favor and act surprised." I give her an unamused expression. "Jonathan's really excited, okay!"

I hold in my teasing, but there's a glint of pure happiness in Nancy's eyes when she mentions his name. I know it's just my heart trying to tell my brain what it wants, but Nancy almost seems more excited when she brings up Jonathan than when she's talking about Steve. But that's just be, being jealous. Hoping for too much. "Okay. I'll do it for Jonathan. And my mom, who's probably stressing herself out. No

wonder you wanted to do milkshakes today."

"Well, I had a promise to keep. And Jonathan was too enthusiastic to distract you. He'd have given it all away immediately if you didn't already know." She smiles. "Who would have thought that the stoic Jonathan Byers could be so happy about a party?"

I shrug, then finish my milkshake. "I know. It freaked me out, when he acted like that on my 13th birthday. He told me later it was because he wanted to distract me from my dad being gone." Nancy nods, but thankfully her eyes are empathetic and not pitiful. "Then he got excited for his own birthday, too. So in a way, I have my dad to thank for getting my best friend to really celebrate his day, you know? I mean, he was like that with Will's. But everyone loves Will."

"He's the sweetest of the bunch."

"I'd drink to that, but I'm all out." Nancy laughs, then checks her watch.

"Well, good, because I've gotta get you back to your surprise." She flags over Shelly, who comes over and shakes her head.

"Nope. No, no. These are on the house, girls."

"Shelly -" I start, but she shakes her head again.

"Our most loyal customer was hurt by some - and pardon my French - assholes. Think of it as 'welcome home' and 'Happy Birthday' milkshake wrapped in one."

"Thanks, Shelly." I whisper, and the older woman gently pats my shoulder

"Thank you." Nancy grins, then gets up to help me stand and leaves the money anyway, as a tip. "We'll be back soon."

Shelly smiles and waves to us, then walks away to get another table's order from the window. Nancy helps me stand, letting me crutch in front of her until we get outside. Thankful for the flight jacket, I lower my chin to hide my neck from the cold and let Nancy help navigate me around patches of ice and thick snow. As soon as she's

behind the wheel of her mom's car, starting the heater to warm us up. My fuzzy sock-covered cast is dry, as are my baggy jeans - still stylish, but only being worn because the rest of my jeans don't fit over my cast. Under my bomber jacket I'm wearing a purple sweater, thick enough that my torso isn't freezing, but thin enough that I'm not sweating like a neanderthal in gym class.

We drive to my house in comfortable silence, until Nancy breaks it. Her fingers, once tapping against the steering wheel to the soft music, suddenly stop.

"Jonathan isn't just happy about your party because it's a party he can get behind." I raise an eyebrow at her, but it goes unseen as she's focused on the road. "I never told you. About... about that night. After you were taken from the school. Chief Hopper drove to pick us up. And tell us about Will. About you. Jonathan lit up when he heard his brother was going to be okay. But the minute Hopper told him what happened to you... he stopped breathing, but also started breathing too fast."

"Panic attack." I whisper, looking ahead guiltily. My best friend had a panic attack, and didn't tell me.

"Yeah." She whispers. "Well, we all did. But Jonathan. I hadn't even seen him that scared when we were fighting the monster." She finally looks at me, then squeezes my hand. "I'm not telling you this to make you feel guilty. He was also so proud of you for fighting as hard as you did. I just... you deserve to know. And I wanted you to understand why letting Jonathan think this is a surprise is important. Because we all almost lost you. He almost lost his sister."

"Thank you. For telling me. He wouldn't have. But you don't need to worry. I'm going to sell it."

"Good." She smiles, then lets go of my hand. "Because we're here."

I smile as she pulls into my driveway, then turns off her engine. "Showtime." She snorts, and we both get out, Nancy passing me my crutches from the backseat. "Thanks for the milkshakes, Nance." I say as we get to the front door, loud enough to be heard without screaming.

Nancy throws me a wink. "Of course. I'm just sorry I can't spend the rest of the night with you."

"Hey, it's okay. We can hang out on Monday." I open the door then frown, to really try and sell that I don't know what I do know, which they don't know that I know. "I guess my mom and Dustin went out?"

Nancy walks around me, discreetly bumping my hip as she helps me quickly remove my boot, relying on my upper arm strength to hold me up as I do so. "You sure you're okay being alone?" She mouths a countdown for me, just in time for the all the lights to turn on and the kids, my mom, Chief Hopper, Joyce, Jonathan, and Steve to come jumping out from the dining room.

"SURPRISE!" They all shout, blowing into party horns and throwing streamers. I laugh and duck my head to avoid being hit.

"Oh my God!" I shout, smiling like a moron. I may not have been surprised, but goddammit I'm happy, which is even better. "You guys!" I honestly tear up a bit, looking at all the people who came here to celebrate me.

My mom and Dustin are the first to hug me, Nancy narrowly avoiding being pushed onto the ground. Next are Lucas and Mike, the latter of whom squeezes me as hard as he did in the hospital. I bend down a bit to kiss the top of his head, and Mike release me with a smile.

My own smile widens when I see Will rushing towards me, still a little skinnier than normal but body glowing with happiness. I toss my crutches to the side to wrap my arms around Will's shaking body, my mom helping to hold me up. "Hi, buddy." I whisper, then plant kisses all over his face and hairline. "I'm so happy to see you out."

"I'm happy to be out. Hospitals suck." I nod and squeeze his shoulders. He's only an inch shorter than me, so we're already practically eye level. I don't bother saying anything else - the matching looks in our eyes is enough for me to simply pull him back into a hug, hiding our faces in each other's necks. We know we have each other, that we can talk when we need to. When things get to be too much, because they will. They already are. But for now, we can focus on the good. The positive.

"I'm glad you're okay."

"I'm glad you're okay, too." I tell him, then we separate.

Joyce hugs me next, kissing my cheek and smiling down at me. "Thanks for bringing Will." I whisper, knowing how hard it must have been for her.

But she only shakes her head with a warm look. "I wasn't about to let him miss this. We're just lucky he was already being released, or I'd have had to fight his doctor."

"Yeah, and then you'd be spending some quality time with me in holding." Hopper quips, but gives me a genuine smile as he pulls me into a hug, mindful of my broken leg.

"Thanks for the gift." I tell him, and the Chief just shrugs.

"It was that or an application to be my new officer. You're more useful injured than Callahan and Powell on one of their good days."

"Oh, hush, they're nice men." My mother tells him, not having one mean bone in her body.

I roll my eyes, but wince when my mom slaps me up the head despite the fact that she can't even see me. "Hopper, you could've just given me an internship."

"Yeah, yeah, we'll see. You know you don't get paid for those, right?"

"Nevermind." I wrinkle my nose and he snorts, stepping aside.

Steve gives me a brief-but-strong hug, then gently taps my right thumb. "Still like it?"

"It's the best." I tell him honestly, and he grins before walking away to greet his girlfriend. I don't have time to miss him, though. Because Jonathan is there with his surprising strength, lifting me off of my right leg and spinning me around. I let out a breathless laugh, holding on tight as he honest to God giggles.

"Happy Birthday!"

I laugh more as he bounces me a bit, both of us ignoring out moms as they urge us to be careful. "It really is!" I tell him, at a volume only he can hear. Jonathan smiles up at me, then keeps spinning around with me in his arms.

He tires himself out a bit, and gently deposits me on one of the cushioned chairs, taking my new jacket and giving it an odd look. "Wait. Isn't this -"

"Mhm. Sent me his -"

"Too?" I nod as he points to my heart, covered by my purple sweater. My own Purple Heart. "That's... wow."

"I know. He saw that my other jacket was destroyed, and... I'll show you the letter later." He nods then sits on the couch, in the spot closest to me. We all gather in the living room, and I laugh when Clue is pulled out, my brother grinning. Joyce and my mom disappear into the kitchen while Hopper supervises us, griping about how a case is "never that easy" until Dustin reminds him about the owl that flew into Eleanor Gillespie's hair. That shuts the Chief up real quick, though he still grumbles whenever one of the boys slips into a thick British accent, throwing around crime scene words as if they're real detectives. They may be, after the week Will and I went missing.

The triple layer chocolate strawberry cake is brought in when Lucas correctly accuses Mrs. Peacock (Steve), with the candlestick, in the ballroom. Cheers are silenced with a slightly darkened room - I reach over and take Will's hand, both of us a little freaked out but not wanting to show it - and a well lit cake. The most off-key "Happy Birthday" is sung to me, but I'm smiling too wide and laughing too hard to care. I lean over to blow out my candles, briefly making eye contact with Mike. As the flames flicker out, I nod to him.

*I wish El was alive.*

Cake is served with extra napkins for the kids, and the minute Monopoly is pulled out of its cage by an evil-looking Dustin, Hopper declares he's gotta check back in with the night shift. I throw him a pleading look, urging him to take me along, but Hopper just ruffles

my loose curls and hugs my mom and Joyce goodnight before leaving me to my doom.

*I really hate Monopoly.*

We waste nearly three hours on it, and for once I'm actually winning. But then I bankrupt Lucas, who throws me a glare and narrows his eyes. Before I know it the board is flipped over and he's shrugging innocently, *faking a stumble even though he was sitting down, the little prick.*

While the others yell at him I just laugh, shaking my head and smiling over at Jonathan, who smiles back and squeezes my hand. Justice is served when Lucas is forced to clean up the game and reorganize everything to Dustin's exact specifications. Catching the kids yawning, my mom and Joyce step in and declare the party over. The Party groans, though Will looks a little relieved, having not been home in weeks. Jonathan helps me stand and Nancy brings me my crutches. Us four teens see the kids off, with Jonathan promising to be home soon.

While Steve and Nancy help my mom and Dustin clean, Jonathan and I go to my room. We both sit on my bed, bumping our shoulders into each other and smiling goofily. He looks at the flowers in the corner of my room. "Secret admirer?"

"One of Steve's birthday gifts. He came over on Thanksgiving."

"Yeah, Nancy told me when I called her." I stare up at him, recognizing the loss in his eyes and squeeze his hand. "I can't believe she told him to."

"I can." I shrug. "She isn't like most girls."

"No, she isn't." Jonathan gives me an understanding look. "And he isn't most guys. Well, not anymore."

"He never really was. He just spent too much time with assholes to let it show." I whisper, smiling out the door as if Steve is right there, staring back at me. "We're quite the pair, huh?"

"The best kind of pair. Who needs a significant other when you've got



a sibling?"

I narrow my eyes. "Lots of people. Because incest is not legal."

"You know, it wouldn't technically be incest since we aren't actually related -"

I groan and cover my ears, pretending to gag while Jonathan chortles. "Oh my God, I hate you so much. Ew, ew, ew. That's so gross."

"Thanks, I'll try not to be offended."

"No, please. Try." I snark, and he pokes me in my ribs. I retaliate, both of us diving into giggles.

As we begin to sober, Jonathan pulls me into his chest. "I was so scared that this wouldn't happen. That you wouldn't be here."

"Me too. I've never been more scared in my life, Johnny, until I was stuck there. I... I could feel my body shutting down." I admit, and he shudders. "I wanted it to shut down."

"Don't say that." He growls, and I nod, clutching the collar of his shirt with my left hand.

"I'm sorry. It was the truth, though. But the minute Nancy found me and I heard your voice... you got me back long enough to fight collapsing. You saved me, both of you saved me. I'm here because you two wouldn't give up on Will, Barb, and me. You're the fighters. I just know how to fight."

"You're a fighter, too. Okay Ver?"

"Okay, Johnny."

Someone knocks on the open door and we separate, wiping away our tears. Nancy and Steve thankfully don't comment on it, entering my room with hands clasped together, though Nancy is quick to rush over and hands Jonathan one of the packages in her hands. "You left those out there. I thought you would want to actually give her your present." She smarts at my best friend, who rolls his eyes at her

haughtiness but accepts it with a gentle look. It's hardly platonic, but Steve doesn't say anything. Or even notice it, really, because I catch him staring at the ring on my thumb, a small smile gracing his face. "This is for you, from me. And Mike, who wants some credit even though he did nothing."

"Well, the kids are broke."

She snorts, then passes over my present. It isn't particularly dense, but it isn't heavy either, and I curiously unwrap it to find a leather bound journal in my hands. The front has a compass embroidered on it, my initials etched beneath it. "Thank you. This must have... thank you."

"Hey, you're only 16 once. Besides, it's more than just a birthday gift. I figured you could use it."

"To talk about my feelings?"

"Would that be so bad?" She lifts a hand to tap at my left temple, avoiding the small scar on my right. "You have a lot, in here. Things no one in this world can really understand, except Will. Things that you shouldn't bottle up, but that you don't have to tell us." I nod. "It's so you have a place - aside from the shooting range - that you can get angry."

"Thank you." I repeat once more, and we pull each other into a hug. After a few moments we separate, and she steps away so Jonathan can give me my gift.

I rip off the paper and tear open the box, grinning like the Cheshire Cat when I see the mountain of mixtapes inside. "Jesus Christ, Jonathan."

"It's got everything you like. Scorpion, The Clash, AC/DC, the Rolling Stones. You like it, you name it. For the Falcon. Now that you'll be able to drive yourself around."

"Still need my license."

"Which you're getting as soon as possible, so I can stop driving you around." I laugh and nod, pulling him into a hug.

"Thanks, Jonathan."

"Like I was going to give you anything else." I smile into his neck, grateful to be with my family.

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### ***One Month Later...***

The snow falls around me as I sit on the steps in my backyard. My hands are warm enough thanks to the gloves, but my cheeks are flushed as I bring my cigarette to my lips, inhaling the smoke and exhaling through my nose, well-practiced. I'd been good for a few months, until the Upside Down happened. Now, it's at least two cigs a day. Just enough to stop my hands from shaking when the world closes in on me. Because yeah, I'm back, but I'm not always *here*.

I roll my left ankle around, smiling at the lack of pain. It actually healed faster than we were told, the cast off a week early. I know that doesn't seem like much, but five weeks is enough time for a girl to stop taking her limbs for granted. I'd still been able to practice archery, but I missed actually being able to walk without worrying about falling on my face.

It's Christmas Eve, exactly a month since my birthday. And in that time I slapped Carol in the face after she tried to shove me on my ass, actually got an A on Kaminsky's final test of the semester, and passed my driver's exam.

But in that time, I haven't once ventured into the woods. Nor do I plan to, not really, even as I sit here with my bow and arrows on my lap, just waiting for a monster to creep out.

I really am losing my mind.

My mom is off picking up Dustin from the Wheelers, where Nancy and Steve are no doubt curled up. Jonathan is probably back home by now, with Will. Their house decorated with Christmas lights once more, only this time they aren't up as an alarm. My house is decorated with them, too, from my roof to the living room. But not in my room. I just keep picturing colorful bulbs flickering and monsters coming out of the walls.

So while Steve and Nancy have each other, and Jonathan has Will, Joyce, and an old Chester the dog, I'm out here smoking. My mom was gone all day, visiting her cousin Thomas in Carmel. Dustin was with his friends, playing D&D.

But I spent my day with the Hollands, pretending it was just any old Saturday. No lights, no tree. Just a fire and a nice lunch, surrounded by pictures of Barb. I've taken to visiting them a couple of times a week, even when I was stuck in my cast. Despite being bound to a contract, I've done my best to offer them small clues. We know what happened to her, but they don't and that isn't fair. So I don't offer fake, unbelievable clues. I mention being grabbed on our way back to her car. I talk about a dark room, about being stuck in what felt like a maze. Of being chased, and then running for days through the woods until Jonathan and Nancy found me on their hike. The trail doesn't exist, the one I would have left if my story was the absolute truth, but it's enough that people know she didn't just leave.

Taking one last inhale of my cig I grind it out in the snow. As I'm standing, something rustles in the trees in front of me. Without missing a beat I lift my bow, arrow already notched, and point it towards the source of the noise. The lights above me aren't the brightest, but they're lit enough that I can make out a small shape, just watching me. Almost like a person. They step a little closer, as cautious as a doe, and I see it's familiar. Too familiar. Impossible.

"El?" I whisper, lowering my bow. I look down for the briefest of moments to pull out my zippo and flick it open. But when I raise the flame, the figure is gone, as if it was never there before. And it probably wasn't. No, it definitely wasn't.

I roll my head and walk inside, locking the backdoor behind me and stepping out of my snow boots. I go into my room first, peeling off my damp clothes and adding them to my nearly-full laundry basket. I sniff my hair, sighing in relief when there's no distinct cigarette smell but still spritzing on some of my perfume. I change into my pyjamas, happy my family likes to keep Christmas comfortable and casual, and slip my zippo into my pants pocket. To protect me from the dark. I carefully put away my bow and arrows, and stroke the sleeve of my flight jacket. I tap the frame of my dad's Purple Heart, and stop to stare just above my desk.

Flowers don't last forever, it's true. But the gardenias Steve bought me will last at least a few years, pressed onto a page from my diary and framed. My brother helped me nail it up, and he was even kind enough not to tease me for it.

It's not the only thing I have hanging, though. My walls are no longer bare. Even with only a month having passed, I've managed to collect and put up pictures of the Party, of me and my friends, and random posters Nancy and I bought at the Hawkins Indoor Winter Fair. And while all of these things help remind me I'm not alone, I don't have the heart to tell anyone that they don't actually ground me. Because when I do see the Upside Down - and it's more often than I'd like, more often than I tell Dr. Owens and Hopper and all those damn Lab assholes - they're there, too, trapped under vines, coated in slime. Cracked and covered in white flecks.

I sigh and walk over to my laundry basket, quickly starting my load before realizing I still haven't washed my hands of the cigarette smell and make a b-line for the bathroom, knowing my mom and Dustin will be home soon.

I scrub my hands, hard and long. Rub them raw, even. Sometimes I have to, or else it feels like I've let go of Barb all over again. I just want that feeling gone.

As I dry my hands, the lights in the house flicker. On. Off. On. Off. On.

*Off.*

The whole house is instead filled with a dark blue light. The air is thin and white specks float around. The mirror and walls are covered in vines, writhing and moving. I try to hold onto the sides of the sink, but the vines creep up and I hastily bring my hands away.

Another vine - one on the ceiling of the bathroom - slithers down towards me, snaking its way like it wants to choke me. With a firm glare I pull out my lighter and flick it on, shoving it onto the vine. My mind tells me they shriek and shake, slipping away like thieves in the night. My mind tells me I'm fighting them, that I'm winning a battle that isn't actually happening, because I'm not in the Upside Down, I'm

home.

*There's no place like home, there's no place like home, there's no place like home.*

Suddenly the lights are back on, or maybe they always were. I'm back. I'm *here*. I'm *sure* I'm here.

*That wasn't real.*

I breathe in, then out, and smile when the front door opens and my mom shouts her greetings as my brother complains about the cold. But as I leave the bathroom to join them, I can't help but fear the dread in my stomach, like everything is not what it seems.

## 9. Ocean Eyes

Hi all, and welcome to my *Stranger Things* Steve Harrington/OC story! It's been a long, long time coming. Seriously. Since 2017 long.

In this story, we've got the Ice Queen of Hawkins, the older-but-shorter-by-season 2 sister of Dustin Henderson, because he deserves an older sibling. She's Veronica, and even though Heathers came out in 1989 I've taken the liberty of borrowing some of my favorite quotes because Winona Ryder Easter Eggs. Seriously, I cannot overstate my love for that movie. Anyway, there's more of a backstory for the Henderson family, including adding the dad to the "asshole fathers club", co-president with Lonnie Byers, the prick. Expect explicit language because, hello, *Stranger Things* isn't known for censoring language.

Fair warning, while this is a Steve/OC fic, the season 2 part will include Billy/OC, but not for long. I promise. He's a great character, but he's a dick until he isn't. Just wanted to get that out of the way. Because again, he's a dick. And don't worry, his ST2 behavior does not go unchecked by Veronica, so there won't be any sweeping his choices under the rug. However, I'm also treating their relationship a bit like Jackson Whittemore and Lydia Martin's from *Teen Wolf*, especially with the later outcome. And there will also be inbetween chapters between ST1 and ST2, then ST2 and ST3, adding some more things as well as a deeper dive into how Max and Billy's relationship changes, because let's be honest that wasn't really commented on in ST3, and I'd like to see it. But this will not be a Billy Hargrove/OC endgame story. Not like that.

Here it is! The \*hopefully\* long-awaited Billy and Veronica chapter! It's pretty long, covering what happened the rest of the school year and in the summer. Veronica is going to be rougher as we enter ST2, so be prepared for that - more brazen, more willing to get in a fight. *Firey*. She obviously isn't a monster, but she's having a rough time internally even with the help she's getting. She's incredibly vulnerable right now, and not herself.

So please don't bash her decisions, because it won't be forever. I'd say that the ST2 portion is really, at it's core, about her learning to move on in the midst of the chaos and poor relationship decisions. A real growth happens, but she still needs a little time. As for Billy and Veronica, a majority of this chapter is about them, covering their first meeting, their first date to them becoming an official couple - it's the 80s, shit moves fast, let me live. The next chapter will be MADMAX, so we'll be back on track for our canon episodes. Also, there will be a few limited 3rd person POV from Steve's perspective, and a couple from Billy. Just to fill in some gaps since Veronica doesn't "see all/hear all". Steve's first one appears briefly in this chapter.

Enjoy the story! I only own Veronica.

Also, I'm considering doing a Billy Hargrove/OC fic since I'm taking a hiatus on the other stories (not this one). Basically it would be Billy Hargrove if he'd been raised by his mom instead, and she married Max's dad, and the four of them moved to Hawkins. Like, a different take on Billy - nicer, not a dick, *nicer*. He'd still have those memories of his dad but he'd have thankfully gone down another path (so OOC/non-canon Billy), and would be still distrustful of father-figures/male authority due to trauma Neil caused. They'd still move to Indiana because Max's grandma lives there, and since she's getting older the family wants to take care of her? Billy would be angry they had to move to Hawkins, so he'd still be a bit of an asshole, but not 100% a dick. And the OC would be Four, so Jane's "sister". I'm kind of interested in writing it, but let me know what y'all think!

**WARNING: THINGS DO GET A LITTLE STEAMY. NO EXPLICIT SEXUAL ACTS ARE MENTIONED, BUT IT'S HEAVILY HINTED AT. THIS IS STILL RATED "T", BUT I JUST WANTED Y'ALL TO KNOW.** Billy may seem OOC, but I promise that I'm not actually changing anything he does canonwise.

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*In The Merry Adventures of Robin Hood, Howard Pyle wrote, "So passed the seasons then, so they pass now, and so they will pass in time to come, while we come and go like leaves of the tree that fall and are soon forgotten." Yeah, at first glance it's a simple, pretty line. It allows for Pyle*



to introduce a linear jump in his narrative.

But to me? In the months that have passed since November 1983, it means everything. Because every word written is absolutely correct. The seasons did pass, and the closer we got to spring, the less anyone in Hawkins talked about Barb, until finally it was March and the last of her "Missing" posters were taken down. Hopper - hands tied by Hawkins Lab but also unwilling to figure out a way around the government contract - consider it a cold case. I still did my best to help the Hollands, but in the end there was only so much information I could give without putting them at risk. It hasn't stopped me from continuing to join them for dinner as often as I can. I make sure they know they aren't the only ones who remember their daughter. Nancy has done the same, but each visit leaves us more and more emotionally drained. But what's a little more trauma, compared to reminding two people who lost it all that they aren't alone.

Nancy picked up the slack when I left Hawkins for the entirety of June. Every summer since he was nine, Dustin has gone to Camp Know Where. While it's predominantly a science camp, they still have your run-of-the-mill summer camp activities. I was hired as a Junior Camp Counselor, having known the faculty for years thanks to my nerd brother. And while I was initially afraid of being so close to the woods, again, somehow it was easier at Camp Know Where. In fact, for a whole month I didn't have any episodes. I could sleep, I could eat a little more than I could before. And most importantly, I was able to make sure Dustin was safe.

But the peace only lasted a month. With hugs and numbers exchanged, mom brought us back to Hawkins, and it was like nothing had changed. Lights still flickered for me. Vines reached out of dark corners. I kept on losing my mind but suffering in silence. I never said I was fine. That would only lead to questions and forced confession of fear. Instead I would shrug, and say things weren't worse. After awhile, most just started to accept it. Or pretended to, at least. We've all gotten good at pretending. At rolling with the bullshit. Of trying to get us all to move on. But that's easier said than done, and some of us have scars inside that won't ever let us forget what happened.

For example, the Harrington house. Steve ditching his title and his asshole friends left a bit of a hole in his social life, which is where we come in. Nancy, Jonathan, and me. His girlfriend, and his former rivals. We spent a lot of time together, more than Jonathan and I honestly wanted to when

*you take into consideration we'd be forcing ourselves to watch the people we like, be happy together. Still, nothing brings pseudo-siblings closer like mutual unrequited crushes. And Steve's very much become my best friend. I'm honestly just happy I get to have him in my life.*

*The only problem? Any time I think of setting foot in Steve's home, my whole body locks in on itself and refuses to move. And then I get angry at myself, angry at them for constantly wondering if I'll be coming over. For telling me I should face my fears. I want to, I want to so bad. But screw them if they think I'll be spending any time in a place where my nightmare began. How could they possibly think I'd ever be okay going over there? Forget it. Not happening, ever. Usually, I get cold. But now I've started to run hot. There's a goddamn dragon inside me, ready to spit fire and burn Hawkins to the ground. I used to hide it behind cool smiles at school, until I got tired of pretending I wasn't different. It's something my friends try to ignore, like I'm still the damn Ice Queen.*

*It's not fair to say they were all constantly asking. It only took me saying "no" four times for Steve to let it go, to squeeze my shoulder in understanding. It's really Nancy and Jonathan who took the longest to get it through their heads that I can be stubborn, too. And I get it - I'm like a sister to them, they want to help.*

*It's not just Steve's house that gives me the heebie jeebies. No, I was in for quite a surprise when we got back from Camp Know Where and my mom asked me to take Dustin to the public pool.*

*I was running on a high from a nightmare-free month. Dustin already had his bathing suit on and was waiting for me in the living room, trying to get my mom to fork over extra money. But my hands shook as I pulled on my bikini, and for the first time since I left Hawkins I was itching for a smoke. But I sucked it up. The public pool is crowded. It isn't like the one at Steve's. I would be alright.*

*Only I wouldn't be. The closer we got to our destination, the more tense I grew, until finally I was pulling up a block away from the convention of screaming kids, unable to breathe and feeling hands getting ripped from my own. All I could see were vines, all I could hear were screeching monsters and a screaming friend gone too soon. Until finally something grabbed onto me, holding me in place.*

Dustin had thrown himself over the console of the Millenium Falcon to wrap his arms around me. My palms were raw, bloody crescent marks adding to the soreness. Both of us were shaking, but my little brother was more focused on calming my breaths. Finally, when it stopped feeling like I was drowning in white debris, I escaped his hold. He just stared at me, concern etched into his eyes, and asked me to take him to the arcade instead. And when we got home way later than the pool closed, and I pushed past my frazzled mother to hide in my room, Dustin told her what had happened.

That was the last time Claudia Henderson asked me to go to the pool.

Still, my fears of Steve's house and pools didn't stop me from spending time with my friends. Steve and I went on morning runs all summer. But with school back in session and Steve doing his best to get into college, our tradition has shifted to weekend jogs instead. Nancy and I still take lessons together. Craig's constantly impressed with how talented of a shooter she is, just like I am. The girl's a serious badass. As for me, well, if my aim with a bow was great before, picturing the bulls-eye of every target as Brenner or the Demogorgon has made me excellent. Lethal. Dangerous. I know there's a mad glint in my eye every time I let an arrow fly, but it's never enough to truly get rid of how scared I am. Especially when I have to stop and center myself when the lights inevitably flash and the world around me is Upside Down.

Jonathan and I are even closer than before, which is saying something. Having come back to my job at Hunting & Camping and Jonathan working at the record store, we always take our lunch breaks together. And if I'm not babysitting and he isn't spending time with our friends or Will, were watching a movie for the hundredth time at the Hawk, or renting something from Family Video.

But they don't talk about what happened. Just like Hopper only talks about it when he's taking me to see Dr. Owens. Dustin doesn't bring it up to me, Lucas stays away from that subject like kids stay away from broccoli, and Erica doesn't even know what happened.

I only have two people I can ever be completely honest with - because that's something that's had to change, too, my ability to lie. Will and Mike.

Will and I share the trauma of the Upside Down. And though our

experiences were different, there's an understanding between us that no one else will ever get. We survived. We hid. We were taking. Vines haunt our dreams, sometimes we have to scrub ourselves a little rougher in the shower because it feels like we have the Upside Down on us. And the closer we get to the anniversary of what happened, the worse it's been. We hide it, though, as best we can. Just not from each other.

Mike and I have gotten closer, thanks to my summer babysitting him and Holly, when Nancy and Steve went on their dates and his older sister just couldn't. His blanket fort for El is still up, a memorial for the girl we lost. I'd put Holly to bed, first, with a song and a book. Then Mike and I would toast a whole package of Eggos and sit in his basement, under the fort. I think I'm the only one who knows he's tried to call El everyday since she disappeared. And I'm not going to tell him to stop.

Telling lies and keeping secrets aren't my only tradition. I came up with a new one, after my cast came off and the vines that felt so real attacked me in my bathroom on Christmas Eve. I turn off my lamp and I carefully open my window so I can crawl through and hoist myself up. With my ass on the roof and my bow and arrows at the ready, I ignore sleep for as long as I can and just stare out at the woods I still refuse to enter, ready to protect my family from a long-dead monster.

So I'm a little skinnier, now, from all the stress and the lowered appetite and lack of sleep. Not enough that anyone's been concerned I'll just keel over, but I've had to tighten my belts at least two notches on a bloat-free day. Hey, it happens. Sometimes we're a little more bloated, sometimes we aren't. Our bodies are weird. That was literally the only takeaway I got from biology class.

I still smoke, but I've managed to cut down to only a couple of cigarettes a week. I've taken to flicking my zippo instead, gone back to squeezing my hands so tightly that my nails bite my palms, leaving crescent indents.

At school, people still steer clear of me. But it's obvious to everyone that I'm different. A little more unhinged. Even Carol and Tommy H have stopped trying to antagonize me. Instead, the still happy-couple leave me be. The halls still part like the red sea, but I'm no longer a silent blizzard. Again, I'm not sure I'm a blizzard at all. I yell, more than I ever did before. I get ready to attack bullies picking on their random targets, only to be pulled back by my disappointed friends. They've started looking at

*me like that don't know who I am anymore. But isn't that what they wanted? Things to move on and change? Isn't that what life's about?*

*And it did change. Life, I mean. It changed when a hurricane blew into Hawkins. A hurricane with ocean eyes.*

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*October 15, 1984*

I tap my fingers on the empty shopping cart as I wait to check out, my items already on the belt. With mom working late the past few days she hasn't had the chance to go grocery shopping. Dustin certainly wasn't going to do it, but hey, what are first born children for? Besides, I was out anyway, having left school an hour early to see Dr. Owens.

Martha nods at me, a little irritated by the old woman counting her pennies and nickels to give the check-out lady the exact change. "I'm sure I have enough!" The woman promises, still picking through her purse. Martha sighs, but the lady doesn't seem to hear it because she simply makes a gleeful noise and hands over everything, barely remembering her receipt as she walks off.

"I swear, you're the reason we have to keep restocking the Eggos." Martha snorts at me, and I laugh as she packs up all the scanned items, leaving me with three heavy bags.

"Okay, rude, I only got four today!" I playfully bite at her, and she rolls her eyes kindly.

"Mhmm, okay. \$75.83 is your total."

"Man, my mom owes me." I grumble, handing Martha the bills and accepting the change and receipt. "I'm so not ready to have to do this on my own."

Martha grins as I load up my cart. "Yeah, you've still got a while before you need to worry about being an adult. Enjoy your teenage years, kid. You don't get them back."

"Ain't that the truth." I mutter, then wave goodbye to the check-out woman and make my way to Big Buy's exit. I leave the cart by it's

friends and carefully kick a door open, the bags definitely leaving marks on my arm under my flight jacket.

I grumble as I walk to my car, only to bump into someone and nearly fall over. Two large hands grab me, but I'm so grateful for the save I don't shove them off immediately. Besides, they don't feel threatening. "Shit! Sorry. Sorry." I apologize.

"It's okay. Totally my fault." I snort at the smooth male voice, and start to look up.

"Yeah, well, I'm low to the ground. Difficult to see." Green eyes meet blue, and I'm swept into an ocean. The rest of the guy isn't bad to look at, either. He's got dark blonde curls styled into a mullet, golden skin, and blonde peach fuzz stubble. He's got a jean jacket on and a red shirt that's only that's buttoned from his navel to the hem, revealing very toned abs. Seriously, most of the guys at my school wished they had them.

"I've met shorter." He finally says, and I bite the inside of my lip when I realize he's been checking me out just as hard. "None that look like you, though."

And hey, this isn't my first time flirting. I've had boyfriends. I'm no virgin. Hell, I even went on more dates than I can count the past few months, all in an effort to move on from Steve. So this new guy won't be throwing me off. No matter how much I like he's eyes.

Seriously, they're like an ocean. I've never seen one in person before. I guess this is close enough.

"Does that line usually work?" I ask, eyes roving over him again as he removes his hands while I shift the grocery bags down. "Actually, I guess a guy like you just needs to flash those pretty pearls and he gets whatever he wants."

"Usually." The teen does just that, giving me a killer smile. "Is it working on you?"

"Walk me to my car and I'll tell you."

"Alright, Cherie Currie." He gestures to the Runaways pin on the left

side of my jacket, as if I don't know who he's talking about.

"What can I say? 'Cherry Bomb' is my anthem."

"Not the worst song you could pick." He sasses, and holds out his hands. "Here. I've got them."

"Thanks..."

"Billy. Billy Hargrove." He introduces himself with that cocky smile of his, but it's not as unattractive as other guys make theirs.

"I'm Veronica Henderson."

"Nice to meet you."

"You, too." I hand him the bags and we walk over to my Falcon, a Camaro parked right next to it. It's got a California license plate, and suddenly Billy's whole look makes sense. "Let me guess. This is yours?" I ask, pointing to the blue car.

He grins at me. "Well, well, well. Beautiful and smart."

"It's a gift. I'm truly blessed, California."

He grins at the new nickname. "No. Hawkins is blessed, because of you."

I roll my eyes and scoff to hide my blush, then take out my keys to open the trunk. Billy doesn't even grunt as he puts the bags in, doesn't shake out his arms to get the blood flowing or roll his shoulders back. I close the trunk and lean against it, arms crossed. "Thanks for the assist, Billy. Don't you have your own shopping to do?"

"Ah, ah, ah. Not so fast, Veronica." He drawls, stepping forward as if I'm prey. "I did you a favor. I think you owe me something."

I'm not prey, though. And I won't be intimidated or made to submit. Not to a teenage boy. So I straighten my back and strut closer to him, both of us barely two inches apart. "Well, I suppose, seeing as how you're new in town, I can give you a few pointers..." I trail off, biting

my lips so they're even poutier and smirking inwardly when ocean eyes flick down to them. "But I'm busy, so you should probably just check out a map." I wink and turn fast enough that the end of my ponytail nearly clips him on the cheek, and laugh when Billy lets out a mixture of a frustrated groan and an amused moan.

"Damn, baby girl. You've got some fire. But it's a little hard to feel burned when you're wearing a cotton candy dress."

I stop and turn, the skirt of my bright blue dress swishing just above my knees. "What, you a fan of cotton candy?"

"What can I say? I like sweet things. And you are definitely a treat." He flirts, and my stomach flutters happily.

"Well, I'm not as sweet as I seem."

Billy smiles, but it's not the charming one from earlier. It feels more real. "Only where it counts."

"And where does it count?" I ask, leaning against the door of my car. Billy steps closer, nearly caging me in but also leaving enough room that I'm not crowded.

"When it comes to getting the attention of the new kid. You've got all of me, baby girl."

I roll my eyes and smirk. "Promises, promises. Besides, we don't even know each other."

"I know your name is Veronica and you're probably my age, which means you should be in school. But you aren't, and judging by how relaxed you are, you got permission from your parents to skip. Lucky duck."

I slow clap. "Wow, you nearly got all of that right."

"Where did I go wrong?"

"I didn't skip. I got out early on good behavior. My mom gave me permission and everything." He seems to get what I'm trying to say, and his face becomes serious.



"Daddy dearest is a bit of an ass?"

"He was. He's a work in progress. Most of us are." I comment, eyes raking over my companion. "I should go. But it was nice meeting you, Billy. I'll see you at school. You are in school, right?"

"Yeah. Junior."

"Me, too."

"And I don't know, baby girl. I bet I'll see you before that. I think you find me interesting." He smoothly guesses, backing up a bit as I open the door of my car and get in, turning on the engine and lowering the window. Before I can respond, Rock You Like A Hurricane picks up from where it left off, and the carnal look on Billy's face - like the cat who got the cream - morphs into another genuine smile. "No way. You listen to Scorpions?"

"Mhm. 'Sails of Charon' is actually my favorite of theirs. But this one's a classic."

"You know how we were talking about anthems? This one's mine." I look up at where Billy leans against the open door, arms crossed. Yeah, I can see that. He's definitely a hurricane, the way he just blew into my life.

"I can respect that."

"What else do you listen to?"

"Why so curious?"

"I don't know. Maybe I was expecting Hawkins teens to just listen to pop." He grunts, looking around in disdain. I look around to, disgusted by Hawkins for a whole different reason. "Sorry. Shouldn't be so rude about the place you're from."

I snort. "Please. I'm surprised the sign doesn't say 'Welcome to Hawkins. You're in Hell.'"

"Oof. Rough talk, baby girl."

"It's the honest to God truth." I smile up at him. "I like AC/DC. And Kiss. The Beatles, the Rolling Stones."

"So good music."

"Nope. The best music. I love rock and roll."

"Joan Jett."

"Mhm. Can't go wrong with her or Cherie Currie." I passionately tell him, and he grins.

"Well, since you owe me one for the little favor I did for you, want to meet up somewhere tonight and talk music?"

I tilt my head, really looking at him. He's all suave, sure. But his lip is twitching a little, nervous. I find what I'm looking for. "No." He blinks at me, as if he's never been rejected.

"Fine, I'll -"

"Pick me up tonight, at 7. On the dot. 153 Cornwallis Street." I reach into my door to grab a loose paper and a pen, writing my number down and handing it to the other teen, who takes it with a rising smile. "If you can't make it, let me know."

"Alright."

"Good. It's a date." I start to close my door as he leans off it, then stop briefly. "And when I say 'it's date', I mean it's a date."

"Okay. I'll see you at 7, Veronica." My name rolls off his tongue and I smirk back up at him.

"On the dot, Billy." With that I'm closing my door and shifting gears, driving away from the Hawkin's newest teen.

As I drive home, I start to panic, just a bit. I just asked a guy out. Well, formally asked a guy out, since he started it. I've never done that before. My dates ask me, and leave me with all the power to actually show up. I've never... this is new. Giving someone else a little bit of control. A new guy, who I just met. Who I don't actually

know.

Then, I'm struck with another thought, one that actually makes me giddy.

The whole time I was talking to Billy, my mind never drifted to Steve. I wasn't comparing them, wasn't missing the guy I've been in love with for years. This could be my chance - even if it's only one date - to see if I can at least move on from one thing.

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I sigh as I sweep the blush across my cheeks, light enough that I don't look like a clown. With faint purple eyeshadow to really bring out my green eyes, mascara to thicken my lashes, and just a touch of eyeliner I'm almost done with my face. All I really had to do was tweeze a few wild brow hairs, proud I've gone the Brooke Shields route with my eyebrows - full and thick, but not insanely bushy. A swipe of pink lipgloss later and I'm left frowning at my curls. *What the hell am I going to do about my hair?*

I groan in frustration, irritated at myself for getting so worked up about my appearance. It's just a date with a guy I don't even really know. It's just a fun thing, an experiment but also not. And he's getting me all nervous and fluttery. That's not fair! I bet I'm just a good time for him, too. One of many notches on his belt, the first in Hawkins.

*Whatever. He wants fun? I'll show him fun.*

I purse my lips and get a fine-toothed comb, teasing my roots to build up even more volume. A few puffs of hairspray later and my curls look good and messy.

Now, onto the fun part. Clothes.

I huff and leave the bathroom, daring the Upside Down to show up. God, what if I get an episode when I'm on my date?

My house is thankfully empty, my brother at the Wheeler house and my mom still at work. I panic a bit, when I check my alarm clock and see it's 6:30. Shit.

I stare at my open closet and bite at the skin around my thumb, really considering my options. For nearly the tenth time tonight, I consider calling Nancy. But I know how that conversation will play out.

*"Oh, that's so great, Vera? Is he in our class? Oh, he's a stranger you met when you were grocery shopping? Hmm. Is that a good idea? We need you to be safe." Please.*" I huff to myself, my voice filling my bedroom. Steve's not an option. At all. Oh, and forget about Jonathan. *"Before you go out, I'm coming over. I need to make sure you're gonna be okay. And hey, you'll probably notice at some point, but I will be following you."* Personally, I think my impression of him is spot on, and while both their voices have a point, I'm not here for it. I've got the advantage. Hawkins is my home. People know me here. The Chief of Police is like a father to me.

I nearly run my hands through my hair before I catch myself in the act, unwilling to turn my curls into a poof. There's admittedly not much to do in Hawkins, Indiana. And not much to really dress up for. I purse my lips and rifle through my clothes, handing halting on that dress.

*Steve stands outside my front door, arms laden with leftovers. My mom and Dustin are inside, washing dishes in the kitchen. "You look good, by the way. I know I didn't say it, before. But... you look good. It's a nice dress." He nods down at my green dress, smiling a bit. It fades, though, and he straightens. "I should go. Happy Birthday, Roni."*

I sigh and run my hand over the lace, closing my eyes to stop the tears. *Moving on. I'm moving on.*

I huff a bit, finally settling on a nice pair of jeans - skin tight, practically painted on. I find a cropped green tube top, and paired with my silver belt and vicious closed-toe red heels, I'm sure to look totally bad.

I grin and pull on my lucky panties and jeans, already feeling like I look good. My tube top is thick enough that going braless is an option, but I still slip on a beige cardigan so I don't look like I'm easy. Still, girls just wanna have fun, you know?

I go over to my desk and look through my jewelry, finally deciding on a white lace choker and a few simple silver chains. I stick four "diamond" studs from Claire's on my left and right earlobes. Having three piercings on my right, I stick a small gold hoop in the first one, completing the look. Random rings are shoved on my fingers, and I look down at the arrow on my right thumb. *Do I take it off? Do I leave it on?*

I merely sigh, and with a simple tug I pluck it off, quickly hiding the ring away in my desk drawer before I can change my mind. It doesn't feel right, but change is never easy.

I slip on a simple, thick silver band and slide my feet into my heels, four inches taller than before. With recently-practiced ease I strut out of my room, quickly reentering the bathroom to reapply my gloss and slip it into my small purse. I write a quick note for whoever gets home first, simply saying I'm out with a friend. I stick it to the fridge under mom's "VOTE MONDALE" magnet.

A quick check of the clock on the wall tells me it's exactly 6:58. Jesus Christ, like Billy's actually going to be exactly on time. If he even comes at all.

I watch as the second-hand on the clock moves. Just as it hits 6:59, a car roars into my driveway, headlights glaring through my window and 'Rock You Like A Hurricane' blasting through the walls of my home. I let out an incredulous laugh and rush over to the coat rack to tug on my flight jacket, the long strap of my purse resting on my right shoulder. The car's engine shuts off, the light fades, and the music stops abruptly. Seconds later the doorbell rings. I count down from ten, opening the door just as I finish mouthing "one."

Billy Hargrove stands on the other side, dimples showing on his smiling face and ocean eyes shining. His mullet falls in smooth ringlets, and his red shirt's been replaced with a white-button down. Unlike at the grocery store, it's closed at the sternum so only part of his smooth, tan chest is revealed. His jean jacket's been replaced with a brown leather one, his jeans are tight, and his leather boots shine. The dangling dagger on his left ear shines in my porch light. "It's 7 o'clock on the dot, baby girl. I pass the first test?" He asks, eyes raking over me.

My stomach flutters and I cock my hip, arms crossed under my chest. "Yeah. But don't get cocky."

"I don't know, I think you like me cocky."

I make a small noise of indifference, eyes flicking noticeably down to his crotch before meeting his gaze once more. "We'll see."

He winks and extends his hand. I take it, a little comforted by the fact that it's a little rough, like mine. "Come on. We've got some music to discuss."

I snort and reach over to flick off the lights, stepping out and locking the door. I walk down the steps confidently, Billy dropping my hand to wrap a strong arm around my waist. He leads me to his Camaro and opens the passenger door. "Ooh. I'm impressed, good looking. Guess chivalry still exists."

"Oh, baby girl, don't insult me like that." He teases, but carefully closes the door. Moments later he's sitting behind the wheel, engine on. He quickly reaches over to lower the volume on his radio, the last few chords of Scorpions muted. With the Camaro started and his right arm slung behind the passenger seat, he backs out of the driveway. "Where are we going?"

"Well, unfortunately for you, bad boy, you're not in California anymore. There's not much going on here. But I know a good place if you're hungry."

"Baby girl, I'm always hungry." He smiles at my, tongue smoothly licking at his bottom lip. I mirror him, but flick at my top lip instead. He makes a noise of interest.

"I meant for food."

"You're call, Veronica." He tells me, arm still slung behind my neck. "Where's this place?"

"Downtown. Near Melvald's. Need directions?"

"No. I mapped out this place pretty well over the weekend."

"What is it with guys and asking for directions?" I sass, and he grins.

"We like to look good in front of attractive girls."

"Hmm. Good to know."

"Is it working?" He asks, driving away from my house and thankfully in the right direction.

I bite my lip and lift my hand onto his right thigh. He smirks as he looks ahead. "Possibly. And if you keep passing all my tests, you may end up with some dessert."

He throws a cocky grin my way and keeps driving towards Downtown. "So. If I were to ask you how you feel about Metallica -"

"I'd tell you they're pretty good, but they're no Judas Priest."

"Oof. That hits me right here." He pouts, moving his right arm off of my seat and instead pressing his hand to his chest. I trail my left hand up his thigh to lace my fingers with his right, sending him a pout.

"I'm sorry, California. Did I fail the test?"

"I don't think you could ever fail, looking like that." He winks at me, then lifts out hands to kiss my knuckles. "It still hurt, though."

"Poor baby. But, '*no remorse, no repent*'." I sing, laughing when he throws me an impressed look.

"'No Remorse'? Good pick, baby girl."

"I figured singing some Metallica would get me out of the dog house."

"I'm a little in love." I snort again, and he looks directly at me as we creep up to a stop sign. "*You came along and captured me, now I'm a prisoner of your eyes*'." He sings. I pause and bite my lip.

"'Prisoner of Your Eyes'. Interesting pick." I comment. He smirks and leans in towards me face, at the last second shifting so he kisses the corner of my lips. He sits back and keeps driving, our hands still held

together.

"What can I say? Yours are pretty great." I smile as we make a turn onto Mulberry Street, striving straight down as we enter Downtown Hawkins.

"Yours are too?"

"Aw, these pretty blues?" He briefly bats his eyelashes at me, and I remove my hand to tap at his jaw so he refocuses on the road. He does, but Billy also uses his free hand to lead mine up to his lips, kissing my fingertips before he lets them go. We pass Melvald's. "We close."

"Mhm. Look for a diner with a big old sign. It's called Sally's Place."

"Original."

I pout. "Well, you know us small towns. We like our little spots with names that go straight to the point."

"That's for damn sure, Cherie Currie." He pulls into a parking spot in front of the diner and shuts off his engine. Billy turns to look at me as I unbuckle my seatbelt. "Ready?"

"Oh, good looking. Are you?" I shoot back, and reach over to open my door. He winks and gets out first, slamming his door shut before opening mine. He tugs a little harder than necessary so I crash into his firm chest, my arms up and over his shoulders. With one hand he closes the door behind me and pulls me even closer, bending down to lightly press his lips to my neck.

"C'mon, baby girl." He steps away and wraps an arm around my waist, hand slipping into the back pocket of my jeans furthest from him. I do the same and he laughs, and I lead him to Sally's Place.

Marcia is working tonight, and as usual the diner's calm and well-lit. She pops her gum at me. "Well don't you look pretty, Veronica. And who's this?" The mother of two asks, her eyes taking in Billy like he's the damn sun. Might as well be.

"Billy Hargrove." He introduces himself, reaching out his free hand to



shake hers. "I'm her date."

"Well ain't you a lucky boy. You've snagged a good one." Marcia tells him, then winks at me all motherly. "Go on and grab a booth. I'll come by with the menus." She walks away from us, still chewing her gum, and I pull Billy towards the booth closest to the jukebox. I pull off my flight jacket and tuck it under my arm, Billy doing the same with his leather jacket. I sit down first, expecting him to sit across from me. Instead he slides in next to me, arm wrapped around my shoulders and jacket tossed onto the empty bench across from us. I do the same, sending him a wink.

"You know, this place isn't completely terrible looking." Billy comments, looking around. "I was expecting a little run down place."

I snort. "No. Sally's is practically a Hawkins institution."

"I take it you're a regular?" He comments, and I nod.

"They have the best strawberry milkshakes."

"Have you tried them anywhere else?" He asks, but not rudely. "Have you ever left Hawkins?"

I grin. "Sure. If you count Indianapolis and Carmel."

He actually laughs, and kisses my temple. "You know, I think I do."

"What about you? Did you ever leave California before moving here?" I ask as Marcia drops off a menu and two waters before walking away, winking at both of us this time.

"A couple of times. My mom took me to see her family in New Mexico, when I was younger. And I've been to Arizona and Utah." He tells me, but I notice how his eyes dim a bit at the mention of his mom. I take a sip of water, then set my glass down to reach my hand up and cup his chin, tapping it slightly.

"At least you've gone out of state." He snorts, his facing adopting it's usually cocky grin.

"I'm sure you will, too. Girl like you deserves to be seen by the rest of

the world."

"That another line that usually works?" I ask, plucking up the menu even though I've got it memorized. He chuckles and peers over to join me analyzing it.

"Yeah."

"Did you really mean it, this time?" I ask him carefully, pursing my lips as though I'm actually thinking about what I want to order.

"I did. Cross my heart." There's a brief pause, but it isn't uncomfortable. "So, how're the burgers here?"

"The best in town, now that Benny is... well. Dead." I wince a bit at the finality of my tone, then turn my head a bit to look up at my date. "Last year was a little strange."

He makes an understanding noise. "Hmm. Well, I guess I've got to order one. With some fries." His lips twitch as he looks down at me. "You one of those girls who orders salads instead of real food?"

"Salads are good. But no. I know when to let loose." I wink at him, and he smirks, squeezing me into him.

"I bet you do."

"I usually order the onion rings and the club sandwich." I tell him. "With -"

"A strawberry milkshake." He finishes for me. "You're so cute." I roll my eyes and shove my body into his, laughing when he slides a bit but then playfully bumps me back.

Marcia chooses that moment to come back to us, pen clicked on and a Cheshire grin on her face. "Aren't you two adorable? Honey, he's better for you than those other lugs I've seen you walking around with."

"Thanks, Marcia." I roll my eyes at her, and she waves me off.

"Oh, shut it. After the year you had, you deserve some fun. So, what

can I get you?" I briefly close my eyes at just how gossipy people in Hawkins can be, before looking up at her with an innocent smile.

"I'll have the club sandwich and onion rings. California over here wants a burger and fries."

Billy smirks at me. "Taking charge? I like that."

"She's a tough one." Marcia laughs. "How'd you like the burger, sugar?"

"Medium rare, Marcia." Billy flashes his killer smile and she blushes a bit, her pen scratching at her pad. "And we'll take a large strawberry milkshake. Two straws."

Marcia flicks her eyes over to mine, grinning. "Alright, lovebirds. It'll all come out real soon." Her shoes click on the linoleum floor as she walks away. Billy and I look at each other.

"Wouldn't have thought a guy like you would ever want to share a strawberry milkshake." I finally comment.

Billy's smile is more sincere, less arrogant. "There's a first time for everything." His voice is also softer than I've heard so far, and the butterflies are back full force. For a second, I wonder what this date would be like if it was Steve in front of me, rather than Billy, but I shove that deep picture deep down. Billy isn't Steve, and that's a good thing.

So I let the butterflies come.

"Now, what's this about you walking around with other guys?" He asks, but his tone isn't serious. It's light and joking, so I grin cheekily at him.

"What? I had a life before we met. What, did you think I was some girl who stayed home like some goody-two-shoes?"

Billy shakes his head. "I said it before, and I'll say it again. I like your *fire*, baby girl."

A giant strawberry milkshake is gently placed in front of us, and I

look up to smile at Marcia. "Thanks."

"Mhmm. Of course, honey." She sets down two straws and struts away, but her shoulders are shaking like she's laughing.

Billy removes his arm so he can open the straws, sticking them both in and throwing me a cocky grin. "Alright. Just so you know, if this isn't the best milkshake I've ever had, you're paying."

I snort and roll my eyes. "Not looking like this, I won't. Besides, me telling the rest of the girls in Hawkins that you don't pay on the first date will definitely lower your chances of getting any."

"Who said anything about other girls, Veronica?" He asks me, eyebrow raised in amusement. I roll my eyes and lean forward to suck throw my straw, peering up at him and widening my eyes even more. He shifts his weight, eyes unblinking. "Oh, that's a dangerous move, Veronica."

I swallow and bat my eyelashes with practiced ease, then lick my lips. "I don't know what you're talking about." He smirks and leans forward, taking a sip from his own straw. He swallows and stares at me blankly. "Well, what's the verdict?" I ask, arms crossed.

"This is... the best milkshake I've ever had, baby girl."

I grin up at him and take another sip. "Guess I got lucky."

"Oh, you're definitely getting lucky." I snort. "Why strawberry, though?"

"Chocolate can be too much, sometimes. It's still good, but it's heavy. Vanilla's good, but it's boring. Strawberry is just... I've always just thought it was superior."

"And it has nothing to do with it being a fruit? The healthier option?"

"Oh, bad boy, I hate to break it to you but there's nothing healthy about a strawberry milkshake." He laughs and takes another sip, then looks at me.

"So, tell me a little bit about Veronica Henderson. What makes her

tick?" Billy asks, eyeing me with interest.

I bite my lip, thinking. Finally, I settle on something to say. Nothing too revealing, just a simple fact. "At school, the kids call me 'the Ice Queen of Hawkins'."

"You? 'Ice Queen'." He smirks, and snorts. "You're too firey for that shit."

"I didn't used to be. Then something happened last year, and now I just have all this anger inside. I just want to punch the whole damn world. My friends and everyone else... they don't see that I've changed. Or maybe they do, but they're pretending they don't."

"What happened?"

I look up at him, not realizing I'd briefly glanced away. "I might as well tell you, since everyone else will probably tell you all about it." He straightens up, arm tighter around my shoulders. "You know small towns and their gossip. Or you will." He nods at me, eyes serious and face void of a smirk. "Last year, I was walking with my friend to her car, after leaving a dumb-as-shit party. God, it wasn't even worth going to." I snort, but it lacks amusement. "We... I guess we stumbled across something weren't supposed to, or whatever, because the next thing I know I'm waking up in some dark, damp room, alone. I managed to get out, and it was like a goddamn labyrinth. Maze."

"Yeah, I know what a labyrinth is." Billy smirks at me, and I roll my eyes.

"Look, I don't know what they teach you in California. Leave me alone." I tuck some curls behind my ear. "Well, I couldn't find my friend. I did see some guards coming down the hall towards me, so I decided to run. Like a fucking coward. Ended up lost in the woods for four days, until a couple of my friends found me." I look away. "We never found her, though. Just more trouble. No one's seen her in a year."

"What was her name? Your friend." Billy asks, and I look up at him.

"Barbara. But we called her Barb."

"I'm sorry." He says, but where I expect to find pity I just see sympathy. "You didn't have to -"

"I'd rather you heard it from me, then the mouth-breathers at school. They like to embellish it. Add their own flair." I shake my head. "Sorry. That was probably a downer. We can just ask for them to wrap our food, and you can drop the broken girl off at -"

"We're all a little broken." Billy tells me, frowning with his ocean eyes a storm. "You went through some bad shit and came out alive. That's pretty fucking cool, baby girl." I smile softly at him, and he leans over to kiss my cheek. "Besides, you're not the only one with a sad story." I nod, and the sound of played being set down on our table breaks the moment. I smile up at Marcia, who frowns a bit when she sees my eyes are wet. It morphs into a comforting smile when she also notices the way Billy's holding me.

"You two kids enjoy." She says before walking away. I reach over to tear into my onion ring, Billy literally grabbing a handful of fries and shoving them into his mouth. He winks at me, and I laugh at the way his cheeks are puffing out.

"Classy, Hargrove."

He swallows and reaches over to take a sip from our milkshake. "Always, Henderson."

We dig into our meals, and in between bites talk about ourselves:

*"I used to surf, probably everyday when I was younger. My dad also made me play baseball, but I always preferred basketball. My friends and I once spent seven hours in the court."*

*"My dad would take me camping. I haven't actually been in the woods here for a year, but I was a junior camp counselor at my brother's camp this past summer. It was easier walking through the forest there."*

*"My mom was a bit of a hippie. Disco queen, too. My dad was an army vet from 'Nam."*

*"My dad, too. He was Air Force, though. He enlisted. Well, my pops made him."*

*"That's his jacket? The one you have?"*

*"Mhm. Birthday gift."*

*"When's your birthday?"*

*"Why, already thinking about a present?"*

*"I have a present for you, right here."*

*"Promises, promises. November 24, 1967. You?"*

*"Aw, you missed mine, Queen V. April 19, 1967. Making me older and wiser."*

*"Older. Not sure about wise. You like Metallica."*

By the time Marcia comes by to collect Billy's money, we've broken into loud laughs, leaning against each other. A plate that once held a slice of cherry pie is empty of all but a few crumbs, some melted vanilla ice cream, and cherry syrup.

"Keep the change, sweetheart." Billy tells Marcia, sending her a wink and a charming smile. Marcia giggles like a damn school girl.

"Oh, you flirt. The women of Hawkins are gonna eat you up."

"I don't, I think I've got a good one right here." Billy grins at me and I slap his chest, rolling my eyes when Marcia swoons.

"Alright lovebirds. Y'all enjoy your night."

"Laying it on a bit thick there, huh bad boy?" I ask, grabbing my jacket. A hand tugs me out and I fall into Billy's chest. My date wraps an arm around my waist and leans down to kiss my jugular.

"Mm. You smell good."

"Good enough to eat?" I pose, wiggling my eyebrows. He gives me a charmed look and kisses my forehead before whisking me out the diner, throwing Marcia one last wink.

"You got a curfew I have to worry about, Veronica?" He asks me once

we're in the car, a little breathless.

"You got until 12 to get me home, California, or I'm turning back into a midwest bumpkin."

Billy laughs and starts the car. "You got some place in mind with a little more privacy?" His eyes flick down to my lips, and mine do the same. I nod and lick at mine.

"Mhmm. Start the car, Billy. I'll tell you where to go."

---

We pull to a stop in the abandoned fairground parking lot, abandoned as usual. "No cops? Nice." Billy comments, shutting the engine off. I smirk and tilt my head over to him.

"Small towns. Small budget. Small police department." I count off my fingers, and he laughs. "Guess it's different in California, huh?"

"Yeah. Security's a real bitch. Makes everything more exciting, though?" He wiggles his eyebrows, and I raise one of my own while pulling off my jacket.

"Is that what you want, Billy? Some excitement?"

He licks his lips as I climb over the center console to straddle his hips, pulling off my flight jacket and cardigan slowly, tossing both into the back seat as Billy's eyes trace over my neck, collarbone and chest. "You gonna make this fun, baby girl?"

"I'm already fun, California." I sass him, then tug him forward by his jacket and start peeling the leather from his body. There aren't many buttons for me to deal with, so seconds later I've got a full view of his abs thanks to the light pouring in from further down the lot. "Damn, California." I run my manicured nails down his golden skin, smirking when he bites his lip and shifts his hips.

Just as my hands creep down to his jeans, his left hand wraps around the back of my neck, over my hair, and tugs me closer so our lips are a breath apart. "You're playing a dangerous game, baby girl."

"But those are the best kind." I mock pout. He smirks and our lips



meet. It's - there aren't any fireworks or any of that ridiculous shit - but it's hot. Really good. Our mouths move together, both of us fighting for dominance. There are teeth biting into lips, tugging at the skin. Tongues flick against each other. The car is filled with the sound of heavy breathing, but it isn't gross. It's better than I've had in awhile, and so different from anything I've ever imagined feeling from Steve Harrington, who's starting to fade from my brain as Billy's lips move away from mine and creep down my jaw. He bites into my neck and I throw my head back, moaning a bit and feeling his smirk from where he sucks.

It feels like I'm stuck in a competition, so I retaliate by leaning forward to rake my nails down his abs again, biting at his throat and sucking at his collarbone. His lips detach from what's surely a hickey as he groans, bucking his jean-clad crotch into my own. I moan but keep sucking on a new spot, right behind his ear.

It works like a charm, and Billy's left hand falls from my neck to latch onto my hips, mirroring the right. "Jesus." He growls. *Growls*. I pull my head back from his neck to smirk down at him, only for my smug look to be wiped away when his hands creep up to trace over my tubetop. His eyes narrow and I nod, with nothing left to say over a few prayers and moans, groans, and shouts of each others names.

By the time we've finished, Billy and I are resting in his backseat, my body laying on top of his, condom tossed out the window carelessly. He had thrown his leather jacket over us, big enough to cover down past my ass. We catch our breath and he sits up a bit, fumbling for a cigarette. He offers the pack to me and I take one without hesitating, bringing it to my lips and letting him light it. I blow out the smoke with practiced ease, and he gives me an impressed look.

"Didn't really take you for a smoker, baby girl."

"Yeah, well, I'm an enigma." I mutter, blowing out some more smoke. He joins me, his free arm wrapped around my back under the jacket as he strokes my skin.

"This definitely isn't what I pictured happening when I came to Hawkins."

"What? Lying in the back of your car with a girl all over you?" I scoff, and he rolls his eyes.

"No, Queen V. You, being the girl. I thought it'd just be some random chick with not much going for her brainwise." I tilt my head as he peers down at me. "Alright looking, not bad for where I'm stuck. But not what I'd want."

"Aw, that's practically a love declaration." I clutch at my heart, and he pinches my butt, making me yelp.

"Cute." I slap his shoulder. "And it's a little too early for that."

"Relax, Billy. I'm not a 'love at first sight' type of girl."

*That's a lie. I fell in love with Steve the first time I really saw him.* I push that aside, though, and start tracing Billy's chest.

"Thank God."

"There are a few at school who're like that, though. Need me to name a few so you know who not to get involved with?"

"Whoa, there. You cutting me loose already? Not a relationship girl, either?"

I shrug. "I am. Didn't want to assume anything, though. Fun is fun."

"Yeah, well I like your brand of fun." I smirk and move up a bit so our lips can meet, just as passionately as before, though less needy.

Billy pulls back to take another drag from his cig, and I do the same. "Shit." I suddenly sit up.

"What's wrong?"

I check the time on my watch. "It's 11:43."

"Damn, we were at it for awhile, huh?" Billy leers at me and I laugh.

"Sure were, Hargrove. Come on, get moving." I order, reaching around for my tubetop. His lips press against my shoulder blades as I

do so, but I swat him away playfully and grin when he cackles.

Once both of us are redressed we slide back into the front seats and Billy pulls out of the lot, driving at breakneck speed towards my house. I know I should have my seat belt on, but with the wind blowing through my hair as it comes in through the open window, I can't help but want to feel free. I whoop through the breeze, laughing. Billy laughs with me, one hand on my thigh as the other drums against the wheel, his radio playing some Metallica.

He lowers the volume once we reach the first of the houses, slowing down only when we pull onto Cornwallis. He comes to a stop just outside my house, and I check my bruises in the mirror with a smirk.

A hand grabs my chin and turns me, rough but not harsh, and our lips meet again. I finally manage to pull away. "Well. Thanks. For tonight. I needed it." I tell him, not a word of a lie.

He smiles at me and rolls his eyes fondly. "Yeah. It was fun."

"I guess I'll see you in school?"

"You'll see me tomorrow, baby girl."

I pause and blink. "Oh. I have archery until 5."

"Damn, you're a badass." He comments with a smirk. "Where is it? Your lesson?"

"The Indoor Shooting Range, by Hunting & Camping. Downtown."

"Alright. Then I'll pick you up."

"Alright." I smile and lean over, kissing him once more before opening the door. "See you tomorrow."

"It's a date."

I gently close the door and walk towards my house, turning to wave at him as he drives off like the Devil. With a sigh I finish my trek, unlocking my front door and gently closing it behind me.

"Sweetheart, is that you?" I jump as I turn the lock. My mom is standing behind me in the hall, bleary eyed with curlers in her hair.

"Yeah, sorry. Late night studying with Robin."

"Oh, how is she?"

I smile, thinking about my physics partner. She's a cool chick. Sarcastic, funny, nerdy. We aren't friends, but we're friendly. I think I sorta intimidate her. "Good. We went to the Arcade."

"Oh, sounds fun." My mom yawns and I walk over to her, pulling her into a quick hug and pressing a kiss to her cheek.

"Why don't you go to bed, ma? You're probably exhausted."

"Yeah, I am. I was just using the bathroom." I nod, and help steer the tired woman into her room, her damn cat nearly tripping me twice. "Goodnight, dumpling."

"Good night, mom. Love you."

"I love you too." She yawns again and slips into the master bedroom, closing the door behind her. I let out a sigh of relief and tip toe into my own room, closing the door behind me.

For a few moments, I press my back against the wood, staring up at the ceiling. And then I laugh and grin, dancing around happily until I throw myself onto the bed, hands covering my face as I giggle.

I lied to my mom, and I know I should feel bad - I mean, I actually do - but for the first time in almost a year I feel alive. Normal. Happy. Like me being different than I was before isn't such a bad thing, after all. Maybe this is who I'm meant to be.

---

The final bell of the school day rings, and while our teacher talks we rush to pack our bags, only a few fully listening to him. Two of them are not Robin and me. As Mr. Lewis - our physics teacher - reminds us "to study chapter three in all its entirety and complete the worksheet on gravity *without directly quoting the text, Mr. Richards*" the two of us are practically falling out of the room.

"I have never been more bored in my *entire* life." Robin complains, the tall girl throwing her head back.

I laugh. "Oh, I have. Last year, English with Mr. Boushebel."

Robin nods, face serious. "Oh, Jesus. I thought I'd blocked him out."

"God, I wish." We lapse into a slightly awkward silence, until I smile up at her. "I've got to go, but I'll see you on Monday. Have a good weekend, Buckley!"

"Yeah, you too!" I stop to make sure I packed my pen, and when I look up I see Robin has also paused in her trek to her locker, watching Tammy Thompson walk by with Ian Michaels. There's a frown on her face, but before I can channel my inner "Nancy Wheeler" and investigate, the real one jumps in front of me. I startle a bit, then push at her shoulder.

"You suck, Wheeler!" I grumble, and she laughs.

"Yeah, yeah. Whatever, Henderson. How was class?"

"Mr. Lewis makes watching paint dry seem like an extreme sport." Nancy laughs some more, and Jonathan comes up to us. He throws his arms around me, tugging me into our usual brotherly hug.

"Aw. See, this is why you should have just tried for AP Chemistry." He tells me, and I roll my eyes as we part.

"No thanks. I'm a safety hazard." Jonathan snorts and the three of us walk to our lockers. Nancy and I were fortunate enough to be able to snag ones next to each other, Jonathan's a few rows down. He briefly leaves us to deal with his shit, and Nancy decides to poke at my neck.

"You look a little irritated, there."

I swipe her finger away and check on the spot in my compact, resting comfortably on my top shelf. "Fuck!" I whisper-shout, then carefully dab on a little bit of powder foundation, smiling when the red spot fades out of existence. "Bless you, Lancôme." I close my compact and slide it into my backpack, along with the books I'll need.

"Bad rash?" Nancy teases, and I roll my eyes.

"You know what it is."

"Yeah, well, I want to hear you admit it."

I narrow my eyes, then sigh. "Fine. I've got a hickey. Hickies. I've been seein' someone, Nance."

It's a bit harsh, but her prying is setting me off. She frowns. "Jesus, Vera."

I rub my forehead. "Sorry. Just... it's new. No one actually knows. Except you."

"Why?"

"Because it's no one's business." I mutter, then close my locker to lean back against it. "But it's good. So good."

"Gross." She wrinkles her nose, pushing at me a little.

I laugh, then wink. "Like, his hands, his damn body. Don't even get me started on his co-"

"Veronica!" She scolds me, and I grin. "What has gotten into you?"

"Don't you mean 'who's gotten into you'?"

"I'm sorry, what?!" Jonathan yelps from behind me, and I stop to groan. There's nothing worse than a protective brother, no matter if you're blood or not.

"Nothing. Just talking about -"

"Oh, God, gross." Jonathan murmurs, shivering. "Jesus." Nancy laughs, the damn traitor, and I sigh. "Who is he?"

"You don't know him."

"But I will?" He asks, arms crossed and frown in place.

"Yeah, eventually. Honestly, Johnny, it's just some good old fashioned

fun."

"What's fun?" Steve asks, coming out of nowhere to wrap his arms around Nancy. There's still a tug in my heart, but the memory of Billy's touch surrounds me enough to act as a distraction.

Before I can answer, Nancy does. "Her new boyfriend."

I roll my eyes. "We aren't dating, Nance."

"Dating? Boyfriend? Do I know him?" Steve asks, straightening up to his full height to stare down at me. I shift my weight.

"No, you guys don't know him. He just moved into town. Jesus, it's not a big deal!" I groan.

Nancy shakes her head. "You look good, though. Happy."

"Well, I was happy until you three decided to pull on my dick." I lewdly complain, waving innocently to a passing teacher. "Hi, Ms. Phillips."

Jonathan just scoffs, then nudges me in the side. "Okay, sorry. Excuse us for caring." I shove him back and laugh.

"Yeah, alright, Johnny."

I turn to look at the happy couple, throwing Steve a confused look as he stares at my hands before meeting my eyes, a sad look in his hazel orbs. Before I can comment, he speaks. "Hey. The three of us were thinking of going to Big Buy to pick up some snacks, then go to Nance's house. You coming?" He gives me this eager look, and Nancy's eyes turn pleading.

"C'mon, it's Friday! That means we can have a sleepover after!"

I look over my shoulder to see Jonathan giving me a begging look, not wanting to be left alone with the girl he loves and her boyfriend. I give him an apologetic smile and shake my head, turning to address the couple. "I can't, sorry. I have a date."

Nancy bites her lip and nods. "Okay. Um, maybe tomorrow."

"I have to work. I'm pulling a double for Evan."

"Sunday?"

I shrug. "I have some homework to do, but if you don't mind me doing it, sure."

She gives me a smile and separates from Steve to pull me into a hug. "Alright. Go, have fun. I'll see you on Sunday."

"See you Sunday. Later Harrington." I stop at Jonathan and reach down to squeeze his left hand with my right. "Are you working tomorrow?"

"Mhm. Only during the day. Mom has a date with Bob."

I nod. "Okay. Meet at Sally's for lunch?"

"Sounds good, Ver." I let go of his hand and walk away in my heeled boots, the hall parting for me like the Red Sea.

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*3rd Person POV (Steve)...*

Steve watches as the Ice Queen struts down the hall, barely giving her subjects a glance. Something changed in her - a lot changed in her - since November. She's angrier, more fire than she is ice. There's been more than a few times when she's lashed out at a bully, near violent before Nancy or Jonathan manage to tug her away. She's lost weight, but no one else seems to see it. Despite the makeup, Steve knows exhaustion when he sees it. Hell, it's in his face every time he has a bad dream. He only ever remembers running towards the sound of Veronica's screams, only to end up at his pool, alone. He wakes up sweaty and scared out of his mind and stumble to his window, staring down at the pool until he remembers she came back, that she's alive.

But she isn't *better*. And no one's saying anything about it. Not to her. Sure, there were those days in the summer when he and Nancy would be sitting on his deck, Jonathan taking pictures of - thankfully - the woods. There'd be a fourth chair set out, unoccupied. And the three of them would talk about Veronica and how different she is, until they settled on letting it go, unless it got worse.



To Steve, Veronica becoming this ticking bomb - constantly on edge, *doesn't she see that he knows she sometimes thinks she in the Upside Down or whatever* - is worse. Because this isn't her. She's never run hot, even before she became all cold. She was always cool, with sharp words and cutting insults that would stop the meanest son of a bitch in their tracks. She didn't hit, she didn't yell. And they're all just letting her be like this. He knows it's hypocritical, since they're all acting like nothing happened last year, but this is something else. It scares him shitless, if he's being honest with himself.

*The worst thing, though, Steve thinks, is that I've lost her.*

Because his eyes aren't just trained on Veronica as she walks away, they're zeroing in on her right thumb. On what isn't there.

The ring is gone. *His* ring is gone.

He refuses to get into it, though. To go down that route, because fuck that. He turns to smile down at his girlfriend instead, into her very blue eyes, and his arms wrap around her tiny frame - delicate, but strong - and he pretends like nothing is wrong.

"C'mon. She's fine. You two ready to go?" He asks the two juniors, trying to ignore the way they look at each other before Nancy leans up to kiss his jaw, pink lips soft as always. He's happy to have her, to be with her, even if that little voice in the back of his head is telling him he's a coward.

"Mhmm. Let's go." She takes his hand in hers, and with Jonathan on her other side they walk through the crowded hall, and no one parts for King Steve.

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*Veronica's POV...*

I let out a happy sigh as I sink into Billy's side, sated and exhausted. The sunset pours in from my open window, leaving everything in an orangey-gold glow. My mom's out of town for the weekend, and Dustin's at the Sinclairs for a sleepover, meaning I've got the house to myself tonight.

Billy laughs and shifts in the bed, sitting up under the covers and pulling out a cigarette. I do the same, taking my sheets with me and curling into his side as we both light ours up. "Damn. You do it better than the girls in Cali, and that's saying something."

I snort and smack at him. "Cause every girl likes being compared to another."

Billy just shrugs. "You aren't most girls."

"Yeah, I still don't like it." I tell him, narrowing my eyes.

"Shit, sorry." I raise an eyebrow. "No, seriously, I'm sorry. I just meant you're good."

"No, you think I'm the *best*."

"I know for a fact that those words did not leave my mouth."

"Well, you were thinking it, California." He smirks and kisses me briefly before sucking on a fading hickey. "Jackass."

"Beautiful." He tells me. "Sexy. Amazing. So damn hot." I roll my eyes but smile, pressing my lips to one of his own fading bruises. I lift my right hand to stroke his cheek, but he catches it before I can and brings my palm close to his ocean eyes. "What happened?"

"Last year." Is all I say. He nods and lowers my hand, then tilts my head so my right side is facing him.

"And this?" He touches the scar on my temple. I bite my lip.

"Also last year."

"And this?" Billy lowers his hand to my left forearm, where a thin scar rests. It's faded a lot over the years, but up close it's pretty noticeable.

"My second time hunting. I was using a knife, and my dad -"

"He did this?" Billy growls, fingers tightening against my scar, and I wince a bit. "Your dad?"

"No, no." I shake my head, but the grip doesn't loosen. "No. My dad was teaching me how to skin a rabbit. I held it wrong and accidentally cut myself. He got me to the hospital right away, and because I didn't cry once he bought me a banana split." I smile slightly at the memory. "Billy, you can let go. Billy?"

"You said your dad was 'a work in progress'." He merely comments, staring down at my forearm but letting go enough that his touch is gentle again. "What did you mean?"

I sigh and shift, putting out my barely-used cig. He does the same, blowing smoke away from my face before giving me his undivided attention.

"I had just turned twelve, a few weeks before. My dad bought me a new bow. Shiny, perfect. My brother had a playdate, my old man was at work. So my mom decided to take me out, since it wasn't completely frozen here, yet, and the outdoor range was still open. I broke my record for bullseyes. Lucky number 13 went in, and my mom was so proud of me she picked me up and twirled me around, calling me her little 'Robin Hood.'" I laugh and Billy gives me a smile, though he looks confused. "She took me to get hot chocolate, then we decided to bring one to my dad at the car dealership, since he had to work late. God, I was so excited to see him that I didn't even knock, and I burst into his office to see him. At his desk. Clothes on, but body drilling into his damn secretary, Allison. Of course, I didn't know what was going on. All I saw was my dad with another woman. My mom heard me scream and she came running in. God, it was horrible. She just crumpled into herself and dropped the hot chocolate. My dad jumped away from Allison and zipped back up, and all I saw was red. My mom grabbed me and rushed me out of the office."

"Veronica -"

"That wasn't it, though. It didn't end there. Both of them followed us out, like somehow their shit was our fault. My dad started spewing some bullshit about calling first while Allison gave me this smile like I meant something to her. My mom just kept sobbing and my dad kept trying to talk to her, and I just wanted it to end. So I took my shiny, perfect bow and slammed it into his car. Over, and over, and

over again, until glass was everywhere, the hood and sides had dents the size of Texas, and my bow was broken. I threw it at my dad and walked away, tugging my mom into the car." I shake my head and wipe away a few tears. "When dad came home, he tried to calmly explain himself, like that would solve anything. He told my mom he didn't love her anymore, that he'd been seeing Allison for a year and had fallen deep. My mom just took it, because the love of her life - who she waited patiently for while he fought in Vietnam - broke her *completely*. It broke both of us, because I'd been 'daddy's little girl' up until then. He divorced her, moved just outside of Indianapolis to start his new life with his new wife while, and I tried to get my mom back on her feet. I nearly ran away, but the Chief of Police stopped me from getting too far. And eventually my mom got better. She still gets sad, though, and I always try to be honest with her. Dustin never understood why I didn't lie to her. But he never saw what I had to see. It gave me goddamn nightmares and a shit-ton of other problems. He never even tried to be around for Dustin. He just left."

"But you wear his flight jacket." Billy comments, though there isn't any confusion in his voice.

"But I wear his flight jacket." I repeat. "Because we both survived our own version of Hell. I'm afraid of being like him, you know? I don't want to hurt the people I care about. I don't like to lie - I've gotten way better at it, but I don't like doing it." I look up at Billy. "I don't want to be my dad."

"Neither do I." He admits, and I tilt my head, sitting up more. "I... my dad... he's a dick, baby girl. The worst. The Devil." He opens his mouth, like he's gonna say more, but his eyes tell me enough.

"He hurts you."

"Yeah." He breathes out sharply through his nose. "Never enough to leave a big mark. But it's the words that hurt more." I nod, letting him talk. "He's always going on about 'respect and responsibility', which is such horseshit. The worst part isn't that, though. It's the times when he's calm and polite. You never know when it's coming. And I'm turning into him."

"Hey, don't say that -"

"No, it's true. But you help me. Even though we only just met, you do." He traces my right hand with his left and laces our fingers together. "I'm not going to hurt you, Veronica. I don't want to hurt you."

"You won't. I won't let you." I promise him. "But, your dad... why haven't you -"

"No one would believe me. No one ever does."

"Chief Hopper will!"

Billy sighs. "I'm turning 18 in a few months. There's no point. Anyway, I'm the only one he messes with. He won't touch my stepmom like that, or my stepsister. Not like..."

I bite my lip, and give him a careful look. "He hurt your mom?"

"Constantly. Until she left." And left her son with a monster. I frown, but I don't want to tug on that string, so I go down the safer path.

"Tell me about them? Your stepfamily? Mine's just the woman who had an affair with my dad and acted like she was innocent." I mutter pettily, and Billy grins.

"Sounds like a real bitch." He sighs. "Susan's this quiet thing. Frail, gentle. Needs a guy like Neil Hargrove to take care of her. Maxine's a little shit. We don't get along. The only reason why we moved from California in the first place was because she was still hanging out with her dad. I told my dad and Susan after Maxine told them I'd been messing around in my car with a girl during school. Dad lost it, the little bitch screamed at me and stormed off, and Susan just accepted everything. So we moved here for a new start. I don't know why dad chose this place. I think he figured it was small enough that Maxine's dad would never find us."

"I'm sorry."

Billy shrugs and kisses my forehead. "Don't be. It's not your fault, baby girl. Told you we were both a little broken. People hurt us, or they just vanish. And it seriously blows."

"It does. But I think we've learned it's better to try and let it go. Even though it's near impossible." I kiss his bare shoulder. We lapse into a comfortable silence, and I curl into his chest as he slings an arm around my shoulders. My eyes close.

"Hey, Veronica?" I nod and open my eyes, leaning my head back to stare up at him. "I felt so alone, before I met you. Like I was the only broken person around." I sit up, and he continues. "It hasn't been long, I know. But I'd be a dumbass if I didn't tell you that I really like you."

"I really like you, too." I admit, surprised at just how honest I am.

"So be mine. Be my girl, baby girl." He drawls out the nickname, and I grin.

"Only if you're mine, bad boy."

Billy smirks and tugs me onto his lip, pressing our lips together. "I am. I'll be good with you."

"Promises, promises." I whisper, and let him and his ocean eyes pull me back in, letting me get lost in the riptide.

## 10. MADMAX

Hi all, and welcome to my *Stranger Things* Steve Harrington/OC story! It's been a long, long time coming. Seriously. Since 2017 long.

In this story, we've got the Ice Queen of Hawkins, the older-but-shorter-by-season 2 sister of Dustin Henderson, because he deserves an older sibling. She's Veronica, and even though *Heathers* came out in 1989 I've taken the liberty of borrowing some of my favorite quotes because *Winona Ryder Easter Eggs*. Seriously, I cannot overstate my love for that movie. Anyway, there's more of a backstory for the Henderson family, including adding the dad to the "asshole fathers club", co-president with Lonnie Byers, the prick. Expect explicit language because, hello, *Stranger Things* isn't known for censoring language.

Fair warning, while this is a Steve/OC fic, the season 2 part will include Billy/OC, but not for long. I promise. He's a great character, but he's a dick until he isn't. Just wanted to get that out of the way. Because again, he's a dick. And don't worry, his ST2 behavior does not go unchecked by Veronica, so there won't be any sweeping his choices under the rug. However, I'm also treating their relationship a bit like Jackson Whittemore and Lydia Martin's from *Teen Wolf*, especially with the later outcome. And there will also be inbetween chapters between ST1 and ST2, then ST2 and ST3, adding some more things as well as a deeper dive into how Max and Billy's relationship changes, because let's be honest that wasn't really commented on in ST3, and I'd like to see it. But this will not be a Billy Hargrove/OC endgame story. Not like that. Also, I'm so glad you guys are liking how I'm writing Billy. It was important for me to show you the potential of who he could be if he stopped following in his dad's footsteps. Also, their relationship allows for us to see another side of Billy that wasn't touched on. Just be patient with everything! While this relationship isn't "endgame", it will still be important to both characters. Also, don't take her lingering feelings for Steve as her using Billy to get over him. While initially she thought of him as a fun little distraction, the first

date had her hooked. Just remember she's been in love with Steve for a few years now, and that's not something you get over in 15 days. Just want to clarify that - the relationship problems that will transpire between Billy and Veronica (again, they aren't endgame, but i will be writing an AU Billy/OC fic soon) are not about her feelings for Steve. It'd be a disservice to Billy and Veronica to make it all shallow rather than direct consequences to Billy's actions in the second season. Again, it's actions over feelings that dictate the outcome of their relationship. Also, just because this is a Steve/OC fic it does not mean I'll be letting his behavior towards Veronica in the next few chapters - and her with him - go unchecked. These are teenagers who are not perfect, and no relationship is perfect. Just something to keep in mind in case either one of them piss you off. But they learn from their mistakes, and they learn how to grow up while coping with their trauma healthily, which wasn't what happened for them between the events of ST1 and ST2.

MADMAX time! I'm so excited to get the ball rolling with this season. We kick off with some brother/sister time with Jonathan, and then with Dustin. There's some more Billy/Veronica scenes, her friends being unimpressed with her choice in a boyfriend, and dinner with the Hollands. There will be some more Nancy and Veronica stuff, too, especially in concerns with the late Barb. There will also be a return of the Upside Down and a Dr. Owens/Joyce/Hopper/Veronica/Will scene. There aren't many Billy and Veronica scenes in this chapter, but there will be next. This one has drama, Steve being unable to deal with feelings which feeds into the next chapter. There's some Tommy/Carol/Vicki/Nicole bashing, but Tina is a gem - the girl advertised her Halloween party with a pun, so that's an automatic win in my book.

Enjoy the story! I only own Veronica.

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Jonathan and I step out into the cool night, carrying our near-empty bags of popcorn and pop. "See, here's the thing. I don't get why the Terminator didn't already know what Sarah Connor looked like? I



mean, wouldn't Skynet have her picture in its system?"

"And why only one Terminator?" I ask in response, passionately chewing on my popcorn. "I mean, wouldn't they want to be absolutely sure they succeeded?"

"Exactly!"

We reach his car and sit on the hood, watching a few stragglers as they walk through Downtown Hawkins. The lights from the Hawk marquis shine down on us. "It was a good movie though. Sarah Connor is a badass." I mutter, taking a sip of my coke. "Plus, the dude who played Kyle isn't the worst thing to look at." He looked a little like Billy, too, except that I still haven't introduced my boyfriend to my friends, so that observation isn't voiced.

Jonathan snorts, though, and knocks into my shoulder. "She reminded me of you, a bit. Sarah Connor."

I roll my eyes. "Because we're both blonde?"

"No, stupid." He laughs at me. "It's how you both changed. You used to be like that, you know. Before your dad. I mean, sometimes you'd slip back into the playful side when it was just us, but... you were both so innocent and free."

"Yeah." I whisper, looking down at my converse-clad feet. "And then life happened."

"Mhmm. You both went through some scary shit, and you came out scarred. Not just here," he points at the scar on my temple, "but here. And here." He taps the center of my forehead and my heart. "But you also came out strong. Fighting."

"I guess we did." I smile softly at him.

Jonathan sighs and folds his elbows on his knees, bag of popcorn and drink between his thighs. "I'm glad we got to go see this, and hang out. I've missed you, Ver. We all have."

"I've been right here. I see you guys all the time." I tell him, frowning. "We take our lunch breaks together. Steve and I jog on the weekends.

Nancy and I are usually having a sleepover or practicing at the range."

"Yeah, but it isn't the same, Veronica."

"Nothing is the same. It won't ever be the same, Jonathan." I glare at him, then scoff. "It's not like you guys have been giving that much thought, either. You all keep acting like it never happened. We're all pretenders, here."

We lapse into a tense silence, until Jonathan sighs and turns to me. "I don't want to fight, rockstar."

"Me neither." I give him an apologetic look and rest my head on his shoulder. "I'm sorry."

"I know. I'm sorry, too." He puts his head on top of mine, and I can feel his chaw moving against my temple as he chews some popcorn. "You got any plans on Halloween?"

I shrug. "Maybe. I think, uh -"

"You and your boyfriend are going to hang out?"

"Sorry."

"No, it's okay. I'm glad one of us is... moving on. From them." He breathes in sadly, no doubt thinking about Nancy. I quickly squeeze his hand. "It's such bullshit."

"I know it is." My mind drifts back to months before, on Valentine's Day. I can practically taste the alcohol sliding down my throat, smell the marijuana wafting around Jonathan's room. Joyce was out with Bob that night, Will was at the Wheelers.

*"I c-can't -" Jonathan hiccuped, "believe they're still t-together."*

*I snorted, taking another hit from our dying joint. "Such bull. Assholes." I growl, dazedly laying down on my best friend's bed and watching the smoke drift around in front of me. My bottles of beer lay empty on the ground, Jonathan hoarding the whiskey he stole from Joyce's stash. "They get t-to be happy, and we're stuck..." I giggled. "Stuck. And they leave us*

*behind!"*

*"Right!" Jonathan nodded, crashing down next to me and accidentally sloshing whiskey over his shirt, but he paid it no mind. "I thought she liked me." He pouts at me, eyes watering and lips quivering. My own eyes and lips do the same.*

*"I hoped he wanted me." I quietly admit, and we cried together over quickly vanishing whiskey and a joint.*

"You with me?" Jonathan asks, shaking my shoulder. I blink out of my memory and smile at him.

"Yeah. I was just remembering Valentine's Day."

Jonathan groans. "Jesus, don't remind me. We had to deal with mom yelling at us for drinking her good whiskey."

"Yeah, well, she only yelled because you were the dumbass who complained about a bad hangover."

"Dude, she almost took all my tapes!"

I smile innocently. "But she didn't. Besides, we paid her back."

He pouts. "Yeah. And it sucked."

I laugh and shove at him, handing him my now empty bag and drink. "Go forth and ride us of our trash, oh ye complaining one."

He rolls his eyes at my snark but does as I ask. I sigh and hop off the hood of a car, turning to walk to the passenger side. I stop, though, when I realize I'm completely alone. It's like no one's there, like everyone but me has been snatched up.

The lights around me flicker, and I groan. Because I'd been free of this shit for a week.

Every building around me is covered in thick vines. The sky is dark blue and filled with white ash floating in the air. Downtown is now Upside Down. I look around, horrified. I feel like something is here, looking for me, but for some reason I feel safe. Like whatever it is

can't find me.

Loud crashing makes me jump, and I turn to see a few shop doors slamming open and shut. Electricity starts to pulse behind me, my body moving towards it like a bug to light. Thunder starts to roll, and the street beneath me seems to glow red. I jump and look up, watching the sky fill with red lighting. A dark shadow moves, but it's too well-hidden behind thick clouds for me to see what it is.

"-ica. Veronica!" I jump and turn, crashing into my best friend's chest. With a worried look he pulls me into a tight hug, cradling the back of my head and winding thin - but still strong - arms around my back. "Hey, hey. It's okay. You're alright."

"Sorry. Just, thought I saw something." He only nods, not quite believing me. "Really, I'm fine. C'mon, it's a school night. I need to make sure Dustin actually makes it home before curfew."

Jonathan sighs but tugs me towards his beat up car. As we pull away from the Hawk, he throws me a concerned look. "Are you sure you're okay?"

"Yeah. Just tired. My mind likes to play little tricks on me."

"Do you want me to hang out with you? Until your brother comes."

I shake my head. "No, I'll be fine. Besides, your mom probably wants you home."

"My mom can wait. You're my family, too."

"I know." I squeeze his hand again. "And I appreciate that. I do. I appreciate you, for dealing with me and all my crazy."

"Ver, have you met my mom? She's way crazier than you." I laugh with Jonathan, smiling as he pulls in front of my driveway.

Our front yard is decorated with lit tombstones, welcoming Halloween. It freaks me out a bit, the mini cartoonish cemetery my mom and brother set up. I try not to dwell too much on it, or else I go down a very dark and depressing rabbit hole. "Well, I'll see you tomorrow."

"Yeah. Get home safe."

Jonathan nods at me as I get out. "Promise." I watch as he drives away then cross my arms, heading inside.

The lamps in the living room are on, the TV muted. The hall is dark, meaning my mom is probably already in bed, so I pour myself a glass of water and settle on the couch, hoping whatever Western is on will distract me from what I saw.

And it works, it really does. Because when my brother comes waltzing in at 9:30 - right on time for his curfew - my eyes are barely open as John Wayne finishes his speech. I mute the TV when Dustin comes closer, giving me a worried look.

"Hey, Leia. You okay?"

I frown sleepily. "Yeah, Jesus, why is everyone asking me that? Don't answer." I stop him before he can respond. He nods, frowning. "I'm fine. How was the arcade?"

"Good. I owe you some money."

"That's fine. Pay me back whenever, D." I stand up and knock off his hat so I can ruffle his hair, having to reach up a bit. It finally happened. He got a growth spurt, and now he's an inch taller than me. Even with his disease, the doctor says he has a couple more inches before he stops growing. Which, unfair, because I've definitely already stopped. "You beat your record."

"No! Because some jerk calling themselves 'Mad Max' beat all of my high scores. Keith, that son of a bitch, was super unhelpful. Please deal with his Cheetos Puffs loving ass tomorrow!" He begs, and I sigh.

"Maybe. Or you could just, I don't, try harder?" I tease, snickering when Dustin makes an offended noise and lunges towards me. I yelp and side-step, nearly stepping on Mews's tail. She hisses at me before slinking off, and Dustin and I stop to laugh at each other. I pull him into a hug.

"Hey, what's that for?" He asks, but hugs me back all the same.

"Nothing. Just love you, Chewie."

"I love you too, Leia."

I break apart from him and smile as happily as I can without the dread knotting my stomach. "C'mon, get to bed. Am I driving you tomorrow?"

"Sure. Goodnight, milady."

"Goodnight." I watch as he disappears into the bathroom then bite my lip, glancing around the living room. The lights stay on, no pulsing or flickering. So with a heavy sigh I shut them off, and try to pretend like I'm not losing my shit.

---

I drum my hands against the steering wheel of my car as I drive away from Hawkins Middle School and up to Hawkins High. My usual spot remains untouched, and I park with ease before getting out and sitting on the hood of my car. Steve is parked a little further away, Nancy in the passenger seat of his Beemer. They're facing away from me, though, so I go unnoticed. I sigh and pull out a cigarette, and as I light it up I smile.

Billy starts school today. Which means hand-holding as we walk through the halls, kisses against lockers or in dark corners of the school. What we have isn't love, but also isn't just fun. For the first time in awhile, there's someone who sees me. Someone who isn't my brother, or Jonathan, or even Nancy. I'm not second-best. For once, I'm the first choice.

A red Ford Mustang drives into the spot on my immediate right, and Tina gets out from behind the wheel. Unfortunately Carol and Vicki climb out with her, and I toss my finished cig to the side.

While I can't stand Vicki and would like nothing better than to punch Carol in the face - again - Tina's a sweetheart. Really. So I wave to her as she closes the driver door and accept a friendly hug, smiling inwardly when I see Carol and Nicole actively avoiding my stare. "Oh my God, girl. That skirt is killer!" She points at my red pleated plaid skirt. It ends mid-thigh, and thanks to it being the tail-end of October

I've paired it with sheer black tights and black closed-toe heels. My tight black turtleneck completes the look, my flight jacket folded in my arms.

"Thanks. Hey, did you manage to finish that math assignment? Trig is out to ruin my life." I complain, and she laughs.

"Yeah, I did. Do you need to see my work?"

"Maybe. Would you mind if I did it during lunch."

"Hey, it's no big deal." She shakes her head fondly. "You saved my ass more than once last year in English. I owe you."

"Yeah, you do!" We laugh and I slide off the hood of my car to join her and the two bitches she decided to be friends with, giving them small nods of acknowledgment without lashing out.

*Progress. It's progress.*

"Oh, I'm going to be handing slips out later, but the Ice Queen needs no written invitation. There's a party at mine, tomorrow. I promise you will get 'Sheet-faced'." She wiggles her fingers and makes a ghostly moan and I laugh, throwing my head back a bit.

I'm a big sucker for puns.

"That's amazing. I'm there. If only to get 'sheet-faced'."

"Clever, right?"

Before I can respond, a familiar engine revs in the distance. I stop talking and move my head towards the source, smirking when the blue Camaro drives into the lot, the first verse of the Scorpions's 'Rock You Like a Hurricane' blasting through the open windows. A jean jacket-clad arm hangs out the open window, cigarette moving in and out. The engine stops and the song cuts off, but I know it well enough to be singing it in my head. The door opens and a leather boot stomps onto the cement beneath it. Billy Hargrove emerges, and I swear I can hear Klaus Meine singing, "*Here I am, rock you like a hurricane!*"

Billy sees me and smirks, sending me a little wink before turning around to shut the door, tucking his keys into his back pocket. A redhead girl gets out from the passenger side and begins skateboarding towards the middle school. *So that's Maxine.*

"Who is that?" Vicki asks, practically purring.

Tina shakes her head. "I have no idea. But would you check out that ass?" She asks, and looks over at Vicki and Carol.

I only smirk and straighten as Billy turns back around, smirking back at me. "Go ogle your own boyfriends." I tell the girls, then tilt my head to look at their shocked expressions. "I'll see you during lunch, Tina. Thanks for the invite." I wave back at her and promptly spin to strut over to Billy. He joins me and leans down a bit, despite my high heels, to pull me up into a kiss a touch too heavy for school.

I give as good as I can back, though, laughing huskily when he nips at my jaw. "You look so damn good, baby girl."

"Good enough to eat?" I tease, licking my lips. He snorts and kisses my lips once more before pulling me into him, an arm wrapped around my waist.

"Always." He starts to lead us both to the school, and I briefly look back to see Nancy staring at us, a little alarmed, her shoulder-length hair blowing in the breeze. But Steve... for the first time in forever, I can't actually read his face.

I sigh and return my gaze ahead. "And where the hell is your backpack, California? Your books? Your papers?"

"Well, I was hoping you'd help me out today, Queen V." I scoff, but it lacks any harshness. Billy opens the door for us, and as soon as we enter heads swivel. "Damn." He mutters as the hallway starts to part, only this time the students are pointing at my boyfriend and then me. "You really are royalty."

"Aw, are you only with me because of my title? Hoping to share the throne?" I tease, and we stop at my locker so I can shove in my backpack and grab only what I need for the first half of the day.



"Well, that and your ass. And your legs. Did I mention how much I love your skirt?" He asks, bending down from behind me to kiss at my jaw, arms wrapped around my waist tightly.

"Mmm, no."

"Well, I love your skirt." I blush a little, stomach fluttering innocently at the affection. A finger draws up to my open locker and points at the polaroid taped inside. "Who're they?" Billy asks.

"That is my best friend, Nancy Wheeler. She's like a sister to me." My finger then trails over to the redhead next her, glasses perched on the bridge of her nose as she laughs, head thrown back. "That... that was Barb."

"Oh." He murmurs, then kisses my cheek apologetically, brushing my loose blonde curls out of the way.

"It's okay, good looking. Honest." I smile back at him and close the locker. "C'mon. We have to get you to the office."

"Shouldn't you be getting to class?"

I smile up at him and kiss him on the lips, keeping it tame despite his best efforts. "I'll just tell my teacher I was helping out the new kid."

"Smart."

"Sneaky." I correct, and he laughs, letting me walk him to the office. On our way I see Tommy turning the corner, and he stops when he sees me. He opens his mouth to say something, but seems to think better of it when he gets a good look at the guy wrapped around me. He's always been a coward, and I've got no doubt in my mind that he's going to try and get on Billy's good side. Steve may not rule the school anymore, but Tommy doesn't have an alpha to kiss-ass to.

Tommy just walks past us, barely giving me a second glance. Billy doesn't seem to notice him, though. He's just looking around the parted halls, admiring his new subjects. I snort and slap his chest playfully. He catches my hand and kisses it, then drops it to glare at a couple of guys staring directly at me.

When we reach the office, I smile up at him. "Go on. Before I get impatient." He rolls his eyes but walks in, face morphing into a charming grin.

I used to have the patience of a saint. That changed, too.

I lean back against the wall, nodding and waving at a few of the braver students. I glare warningly at Keith, remembering that he was a dick to my brother. He pales a bit and rushes off, and I consider my job done.

"So, that's your boyfriend?" Nancy asks, and I jump a bit. With Steve behind her and Jonathan next to her, I can't help but feel a little ambushed.

"Yes." Is all I say, arms crossed. "So, what do you think?"

"He's... attractive. Don't know how I feel about the mullet." She comments, and I laugh.

"I like it. It's something to grab onto." I wink at her and she flushes a bit, but shoves me playfully on the shoulder.

"Gross."

"What's his name?" Jonathan asks, frowning a bit.

"Billy Hargrove. He's from California."

"Jesus, Roni, why'd you wait so long to talk about him?" Steve asks, a little put off. I haven't heard that tone of voice in a year, so my mouth twists unhappily.

"Because it's new, and I actually like him, and I just wanted something that could be mine. Just for a little bit. Is that alright with you?" I growl back, and his hazel eyes darken.

"Okay, whatever. I've got English, I'll see you later. You coming Nance?" Steve asks, smiling down at his girlfriend, though it doesn't reach his eyes.

"Uh, sure. Talk to you in history?" She asks me, Steve pulling her

away by her hand.

"Yeah!" I shout after her, then sigh and look up at Jonathan. "What's his deal?"

"Well, you did keep Billy a secret."

"Yeah, well, he shouldn't care." I tell Jonathan, pouting a bit.

"Veronica, you two are close. Really close. I'm your brother, Nancy's your sister, but he's, like, your best friend." Jonathan reminds me, voice gentle and soothing. "He's probably just hurt you didn't try and introduce him."

I sigh and rub the left side of my nose. The door next to us opens and Billy steps out, a few pieces of paper in his hands. "Baby girl, Mrs. Scott could give you a run for your money. I may have to trade in for an older model."

I groan. "Oh, gross. She's 63!" Billy laughs and comes up to me, pausing briefly when he sees that I'm not alone.

"And who's this?" Billy asks, arm slung over my shoulders.

"Billy Hargrove, meet Jonathan Byers. He's basically my brother. My slightly older, very protective brother." I tease the photographer, who rolls his eyes and playfully kicks at my chin. He then holds out his hand to the slightly taller male, who shakes it just as firmly.

"So you're the boyfriend." Jonathan narrows his eyes a bit. "You are not what I pictured."

"Is that a good or bad thing?" Billy asks, raising an eyebrow but smiling pleasantly.

Jonathan shrugs. "It's too soon to decide, *Billy*."

"Is this the part where you threaten to kill me if I hurt your sister?" My boyfriend asks, and Jonathan shakes his head.

"No. This is the part where I tell you that if you hurt her, *she'll* kill you." He grins devilishly and smacks a wet kiss onto my cheek, all

brotherly and disgustingly affectionate. "I've got calculus. Try not to be late for French. Nice to meet you, man. Welcome to Hawkins." He waves at my boyfriend and walks away, shoulder bag slung behind him.

"Should I be worried about him whisking you away?" Billy teases, but he sounds a little less confident. So I look up at him and smile, kissing his cheek.

"Trust me, I'm not his type. And he's not mine. Now c'mon, what do you have first?"

"Biology."

I nod and lead him towards the classroom, our hands clasped together tightly. Well, Jonathan meeting him could have gone worse. Now I just need to introduce him *properly* to Nancy and Steve. *Oh, joy.*

---

Nancy and I walk out of English together, textbooks held close to our chest. Tina is busy handing out orange slips, and she winks when she hands one to me. "Bring that boyfriend of yours, girl."

I laugh. "I'm sure he's game. Thanks for the help with trig, again. You're a real lifesaver."

"Anything for my Queen." I laugh and we curtsy at each other before Nancy tugs me away. However, when Jonathan follows after us she briefly turns around.

"Hey, Tina, could I get one more?"

"Of course, Nancy." She smiles prettily and hands over the orange slip. The three of us walk away and Nancy shoves the extra paper into Jonathan's stomach. He stumbles a bit and catches it, and I laugh.

"You're coming to this." Nancy orders, and I make room for Jonathan to walk in between us.

He reads it and sighs, officially done. "Come and get sheet-faced'. Bet you enjoyed that." Jonathan smirks at me, and I stick my tongue out

at him. "No, I'm not." He tells both of us, and I pout.

"Oh, come on, Johnny. Live a little."

"Yeah, I can't let you sit all alone Halloween. That's just not acceptable."

"Exactly!" I gesture to Nancy in agreement, a freshman pulling her friend out of the way. I smile a little warmly at them, trying to convey that it's okay.

"Well, you can relax. Both of you. I won't be alone."

I raise my eyebrow in disbelief. "Yeah, no offense, buddy, but you've only got three friends."

He gives me a wounded look. "Okay, rude. For your information, I'm going Trick-or-Treating with Will."

"And as sweet as that is, you should also hang out with people your own age."

"Glass houses, *Huntress*." I shove him playfully.

"You're chaperoning him all night?" Nancy asks in disbelief.

"Yeah."

"No. No way." She shakes her head, grinning. "You're gonna be home by 8:00, listening to the Talking Heads and reading Vonnegut or something."

I smile at the floor, fondness filling my stomach at the fact that she knows him so well. It also makes me a little sad, for my brother. A girl who isn't me finally knows him, and she's with another guy.

"Sounds like a nice night." Jonathan tells us, grinning a bit. We stop at our lockers and I open mine, shoving in my books so I can turn around and face them for a bit.

"Jonathan, just come. I mean, who knows. You might even, like, meet someone." Nancy shrieks as she opens her locker, Steve rushing in

from behind her and lifting her up so his back is against the lockers. He laughs and sets her down, and she turns to slap at his chest. "Oh my God, take those stupid things off!" Nancy tells her boyfriend, who removes his sunglasses.

I turn away, a small pang in my heart when I hear the gentleness in his voice as he says, "I missed you." Instead, I watch Jonathan walk away, head down.

"It's bee, like, an hour."

"Tell me about it." I turn back to my locker and pull out my bag, a little too focused on what I need.

"Oh, Vera." Nancy addresses me, and I look at her as I close my locker, jacket on and backpack slung over one shoulder. "You remembered we have dinner at the Hollands tonight, right? 5:30?"

I nod. "Yeah. I know. Thanks for coming with, by the way. It's harder when it's just me." I admit, and she wraps me in a hug.

"I know. Oh, how was your appointment yesterday?" She asks me.

"I moved it to today, remember?"

"Right. Mark needed you after school. Didn't you and Jonathan go see a movie?"

"Mhmm. *The Terminator*. It was good. Jonathan bitched at me a bit, but he was actually into it."

"I'm surprised you didn't go with Billy." Steve says, and I raise an eyebrow.

"Okay, are you seriously mad at me for not telling you about him?"

"Yeah, a little."

"Well, it wasn't any of your business."

Steve sighs. "I know. I'm sorry. I just... I worry about you. We all do."

"I'm sorry, too. I shouldn't have been so secretive about him." I admit, biting my lip. "I just didn't want it to be a big deal."

"Whatever." He mutters, though it isn't as harsh as earlier. I give them both a soft smile.

"I've got to go. But I'll see you guys tonight."

"Okay. Good luck." Nancy squeezes my elbow and lets me go, and I act like I don't feel their eyes following my every move.

When I get outside, the first thing I see is Billy leaning against his car, Tommy passionately talking to him while Carol hangs off her boyfriend's arm. Nicole is on the other side, and Vicki is standing a little closer to Billy than he seems to appreciate, judging by the looks he's giving her.

So, being the hero I am, I execute plan "Rescue Billy."

"Hey there, California." I greet, walking so I'm standing directly in front of him. He grins and leans down to pull me into another kiss.

"No more turtlenecks." He groans, tugging a bit at the fabric hiding my neck.

"Alright, you vampire."

"I'm way too tan to be a vampire, baby girl."

I snort and turn in his arms, my back pressing against his chest and his legs on either side of mine. His arms are wrapped around my hips, hands clasped together on my stomach. "I see you made some friends." I scowl a bit, but it goes unnoticed by him.

"Well, I was all alone. I had to talk to someone."

Yeah, but did it have to be these assholes?

"Your boyfriend's pretty awesome, Veronica." Tommy grins at me, like we don't have bad blood. There's a little bit of fear in his eyes when he glances at Billy. "How the hell did you meet?"

"Big Buy. Someone wasn't watching where she was going." Billy jokes, kissing my cheek.

"She's used to people parting for her." Carol speaks up, but the smile is much friendlier than I've ever seen appear on her face.

I laugh, doing my best to hide my contempt for her. Billy laughs, too. "In all fairness, I did run into her purposefully. I needed to get your attention somehow." He tells me, turning my chin back so I can stare at him.

I refuse to blush in front of his new buddies, though, and instead roll my eyes. "Or you also weren't paying attention."

"Shh." I huff playfully.

"Well, you did something right. Our Ice Queen's been around town with a few guys, but none of them have actually made an impression." Tommy wiggles his eyebrows at me, egging me on.

It goddamn works. "Probably because every guy here's overcompensating. Guess California just does everything bigger."

Billy laughs, loud and dangerous. It's thrilling. "Baby girl. You're fire's intoxicating." He whispers so no one else can hear. "Hey, did you hear about the party tomorrow?" My boyfriend asks.

I nod. "First thing. We're going, right?"

"Hell yeah, we are. These guys invited us to get the party started a little early, over at Tommy's place."

I bite the inside of my cheek. "Sounds good."

"Just don't go to wild, Hargrove." Tommy smirks. "Don't need you upchucking if you decide to do a keg-stand."

"I can handle my alcohol, Tommy." Billy tells him.

"Well, you're gonna have to, if you want to beat King Steve's record. That'll really knock him off the social ladder. Secure your spot as Hawkins royalty, without having to depend on the Ice Queen."



"Aww, but how else would I be dating him?" I tease, and Billy laughs again, remembering our earlier conversation.

"You're a goddamn menace, Queen V."

I smile at him as I turn in his arms. "I'm also running late."

"Right. For your -"

"Mhmm." I only told him it was therapy, but there wasn't any judgment. Just acceptance, which was... it was nice. I lean back up and pull him into another kiss.

"We meeting up tonight?"

"Sorry, bad boy. I have dinner with the Hollands. But, you can drive me to school tomorrow? My brother's biking with his friends."

"Alright, sounds like a plan." I push off from his chest, and glance over his shoulder to see the redheaded girl skating towards us, hands in her jean pockets.

"Head's up, California." He follows my line of sight and instantly tenses. I grab his forearms and gently squeeze them, and he breathes out. "Introduce me."

"She's got a big mouth. Could slip up with Neil." Billy quietly reminds me, and I look up into his ocean eyes.

"And if he tries anything with me, I'll sic the damn Chief of Police on him."

"Fair enough." He concedes. "You're late, Maxine."

"Sorry. Was trying a new trick." The redhead glares up at him, all fire. "Don't call me that."

"Sure thing, Mad Max." I furrow my brows, trying to figure out why the name is so familiar.

*Oh. Mad Max. She beat Dustin's high scores! Oh, that's gold. Wait until I tell him.*

"What's with the fan convention?" She sasses, and he rolls his eyes.

"Just some new friends. And this is my girlfriend, Veronica Henderson."

"It's nice to meet you. I'm guessing you go by Max, right?" I ask, waving friendly at her. Her eyes rake over me, as if she's trying to get a reading. She just frowns. "Yeah. Nice to meet you." She dives into the car and slams it behind her, and Billy starts to vibrate.

"Whoa, it's okay. Calm down." I tell him, and he huffs.

"For you, baby girl." I kiss him one more time. "Alright, get out of here." I roll my eyes and shove at him, laughing when he smacks my butt.

"I'm going, I'm going. Later, guys." I wave to my sworn enemies, all of whom look incredibly confused. As I walk around Tina's car to get into my Falcon, my gaze lands on Steve. Nancy's standing off to the side, talking to Ally. But he's leaning against a pole, arms crossed as he glares at me and the party I just left behind. I just sigh and get into the car, lowering my window so I can smoke without filling up the car and peeling out of the lot, blowing a kiss to Billy.

The drive to Hawkins Lab is quick, but just as unsettling as always. It gets worse, the closer I get. Every time. Like something's tugging me back into the hellhole.

The security guard recognizes me instantly and lets me in without any hassle, and I park next to Hopper's cop car. I'm running a little late, so I haul ass inside and see Hopper, Joyce, and Will hanging out in the lobby, the Byers matriarch wrapped around her son.

"Cutting it a little close, huh Robin Hood?" Hopper asks. I roll my eyes but let him pull me into a hug.

"Sorry. I was talking to some friends." I hug Joyce next, then Will. Thankfully he's still shorter than me, but I fear the day he finally gets a growth spurt.

"You mean your boyfriend?" Joyce teases. "The ladies at Sally's let it slip." She winks at me, and I snort.

Typical.

"Hang on, boyfriend?" Hopper asks. I gulp and Joyce gives me an apologetic look.

"It's new, Hop."

"Well, still. Maybe I should meet him. Have a little chat."

"No, nope. C'mon, Will. Let's go get ready to be psychoanalyzed." I smirk and Will laughs, grabbing my hand as I tug him away from the adults.

After changing into our hospital gowns - separately, duh - we go into the examination room. Hopper and Joyce are already there with some nurses, waiting for us to get the show on the road. We either do our appointments together or separately, depending on what day we go in.

They weigh us, measure us - that part's a little insulting, like, if I haven't grown in the months I've been coming, it's clearly not going to happen. A lady takes our blood, but I've always hated needles so Hopper holds my free hand and tells me about how a crow scared him at Merrill's farm. I laugh, trying to ignore how nauseous I am.

Next to me, Will's dealing with the blood loss like a pro. Seriously, he's the strongest kid I know. He gives me a comforting smile and I grin back, happy I'm not alone in all this.

Once they're satisfied with the blood they've taken, they move on to testing our blood pressure. We pass with flying colors.

They mark our foreheads and the sides of our cheeks with a red pencil, taping the little monitors to us. Dr. Owens walks in as the receiver turns on, scanning our brain waves. "Sir Will and Lady Veronica." He greets, folders in hand. "How are ya? Mom. Pop." He greets the adults, eyes briefly flicking down to the fatherly way Hopper is holding my hand. The Chief of Police gives me a small smile.

Yeah. I guess he sort of is my pop.

"Let's take a look, see what's going on here." Dr. Owens stares down at our readings. "Well, Will, I see you shaved off a pound since last week. Must be making room for all that Halloween Candy. And Veronica, it looks like not much has changed."

"It never does." I mutter, but I go ignored.

"Still, I'd really like for you to eat a little more. You're nowhere near dangerous in terms of weight, but I'm worried about your energy levels."

"Okay." I nod.

"You going to be eating much candy?"

I shrug. "Depends on if I manage to sneak some from my little brother."

"What's your guys' favorite candy? Desert island candy, if you had to pick one?"

I frown. "I can't just pick one. It'd be Smarties or Three Musketeers."

"Fair enough. And you, Sir Will?" Dr. Owens asks.

The youngest Byers bites his lip. "I don't know."

"Come on. Life or death situation, what would you pick?"

"I guess, uh," Joyce mouths something to him, "Reese's Pieces."

I grin. "Good call. Good call." Dr. Owens tells him. I'm more of a Mounds guy, but I gotta say, peanut butter and chocolate," he quickly wheels his chair over to the table behind him to toss down the files before returning to us, "come on, hard to beat that."

"I don't know. A Three Musketeers bar literally saved my life." I comment, though the remark falls flat for Hopper, judging by the glare he throws my way.

"Touché. Alright, so tell me what's going on with you two. Have any episodes?" Dr. Owens asks us, and Will looks at his mom, who nods

encouragingly and worriedly. I realize I never told them what happened, so I look down.

"I had one last night." I quietly admit, and feel both adults glaring at me. I look up at Hopper. "I'm sorry. I just..."

"Okay, kid." He nods, removing his hand from mine to rub them over his face.

I look at Will, reaching over so we can squeeze each others hands in solidarity. "Me, too." Will tells the good doctor, who nods in though.

"Alright. Who wants to go first?"

I sigh. "I will." I shift up on the leather seat, still holding Will's hand. "My friend and I had just left the theatre. We saw The Terminator. It was awesome, you should check it out." Hopper clears his throat. "Right. So, Jonathan left to go throw out our trash, and I was alone by the car. The lights flickered, like they do before I have an episode. Then they just shut off. Everyone was gone. It was just me. There was pulsing electricity, the same damn vines and white flecks in the sky. The doors on the shops banged open. But it was also different, this time. There was thunder, and red lightning. And it looked like there was this giant... *thing*... hiding behind the clouds. Then Jonathan snapped me out of it."

"That sounds terrifying. Is that how you felt?"

I pause, blinking. "I was scared, yeah. But I was also... it felt like something was trying to find me. But it couldn't. So I also felt, uh, safe? Like I wasn't in immediate danger. It was the location that scared me, not the event." I try to word, but Dr. Owens nods like he understands. "I'd really been getting better, I promise. I went a whole week without one. Something changed, I guess."

"These things aren't set in stone, your episodes. PTSD doesn't run on a regularly planned schedule, Veronica. You'll have good days and bad days." I nod, and he focuses his attention on Will. "What about you?"

Will shifts like I did, then squeezes. "I was, I was at the arcade with my friends. The lights flickered, and my friends were there, but then

they weren't. And I was back there again. Like Veronica."

"In the Upside Down?" Dr. Owens ask, but even though the question is directed at Will, we both nod. "Alright, so what happened next?"

"I heard this noise, so I went outside, and it was worse."

"How was it worse?"

"There was this storm. Just like Veronica described."

"Okay." Dr. Owens nods. "So, how did you feel when you saw the storm."

"It was different than she did." Will nods towards me. "I felt... frozen."

"Heart racing?"

"Just frozen."

"Like, frozen cold? Frozen to the touch?"

"No. Like how you feel when you're scared, and you can't breath or talk, or do anything." Will corrects. "I felt this evil, like I was being watched. Only it found me. It was like it was looking at me." I squeeze his hand tighter, anchoring us together. He squeezes back.

"It was evil."

I can't help the sass that pours out of my mouth. "No, I'm sure it was just hoping to give us an invitation to his Halloween party. Maybe a playdate."

"Veronica!"

"Hooligan!" Joyce and Hopper scold me, and I roll my eyes. Dr. Owens laughs.

"No, she's right, it was a stupid question. Well, what do you think the evil wanted?" He asks, clearing his throat.

"To kill."

I swallow sharply. "To kill you?" Dr. Owens questions.

Will turns his head so his looking directly at the older male. "Not me. Everyone else."

---

Will and I wait on the bench outside of Dr. Owens office, dressed in our normal clothes with the red marks wiped away. I have his head pulled onto my chest, arms wrapped around his thinner frame. "I'm sorry." I finally say, after a long silence. "I should have called you after it happened. I knew it felt different."

"No, it's okay." Will tries to assure me, but I'm plagued with guilt. "I'm fine."

"No, you aren't. Neither one of us are, no matter what Doc tells us." I glare at the office door.

"Well, I'm tired of not being fine. And I'm tired of everyone babying me. Aren't you?" Will asks, glaring up at me. I sigh, pressing a kiss to the top of his head.

"They don't baby me. It's more suffocating than that. But they also... they act like nothing happened. That's worse to me. That they're pretending like we can all just forget it. The Upside Down, the Demogorgon. Barb. El." My voice fades when I say the last two names, feeling stabs in my heart when I remember the friends I lost. Both so innocent and strong. "I don't want to forget."

"Yeah. Like learn to move on, without ignoring the truth."

"Mhm."

"Me too." He whispers. "But all those people treating us like we're only ever going to be victims is making it hard."

"Right? Bad shit - *stuff* - happens all the time. But I don't want it ruling my life." I sigh into his hair. "What time did you have your episode?"

"Probably around 7:15. You?"

I pause, thinking about what time we left the Hawk. The movie ended at 7, we spoke on the hood for -

"Fifteen minutes." I mumble, and he pulls away from me so we can stare at each other. "Mine happened around 7:15, too."

Will blinks at me, lips pursed in concern. "Should we tell them?"

I pause. "We should, right?"

"Only, 'once is happenstance'." The youngest Byers quotes Ian Fleming, and I nod, following along.

"'Twice is coincidence',"

"'The third time it's enemy action'." Will finishes the quote.

I nod, understanding him. "So, we wait?"

"Yeah. It'll only be worse, if we tell them. We could kiss the outside world goodbye. No Halloween candy, no friends, no boyfriend." He teases me, and I stick my tongue out at him.

The door opens and Dr. Owens steps out, smiling at us as the other two adults exit. "Alright. I'll see you both next week. Let's get you guys on the road. I'll show you out."

We walk in silence as we move through the halls, getting out in record time. Dr. Owens leaves us by the exterior stairs and wishes us a "Happy Halloween" before an assistant gets his attention. I walk with Will to his car, the two of us mulling over everything in silence. I smile as Joyce and Hopper talk about her boyfriend "Bob the Brain." She smiles, but it falls after she hugs me tight and unlocks the car.

"Hey. Things get worse, you call me first." Hopper tells her. She nods. "Call me."

"Okay." She promises, getting in her car and driving off with a small wave. I turn and look up at Hopper, who's leaning against his cruiser.

"I'm sorry." I finally say. "I should have called."



"Yeah. You should've. But I get why you didn't."

"What did he say?" I ask, nodding in Dr. Owens direction. Hopper sighs. "C'mon, I have a right to know. My mom doesn't have a clue what's going on and my brother doesn't need to deal with this shit."

"Language."

"Hypocrite." I bite back, and he laughs before sobering up.

"He called it the Anniversary Effect. They usually see it in soldiers. The anniversary of the event -"

"Triggers traumatic memories." I finish for him, figuring it out. "So, what do we do? What do I do?"

"Dr. Owens says to act like nothing is happening."

"So, just pretend everything's fine? Should be easy, everyone else it."

"Whoa, where'd that come from?" Hopper asks, surprised.

"You! Steve! Jonathan! Nancy! Everyone but me, Joyce, Mike, Will, and the Hollands! You're all just walking around like nothing happened, and it's so damn stupid! Stop pretending that everything is fine, nothing is fine!" I scream at him, tearing up. "Nothing's fine." I whimper, and he pulls me into a tight hug.

"I know kid. I know." Hopper whispers into my hair, and he lets me sob out all my frustration in the near-empty Hawkins Lab parking lot.

Finally, when my tears subside I step away from him, wiping under my eyes and thanking the Lord I decided against wearing eyeliner today. Hopper gives me a comforting pat, a small wet patch starting to dry on the inside of his winter jacket. "Thank you. You don't have to keep coming here. Not for me, anyway." I play with my fingers, and he smiles down at me.

"Of course I do, Veronica. You're... I'm sorry you feel like we're pretending everything's fine. And we are. So whenever you need to talk to someone - an adult who isn't a shrink or whatever Dr. Owens is - you can call me. I promise, I'll answer."

I nod, and smile. "Thanks, Hop."

"Of course. No get on home, hooligan. Oh, and after Halloween, why don't you bring your boyfriend to the station? Let me get to know him."

"Fat chance, Chief!" I shout, walking back to my car and getting in, getting the hell away from the Lab.

I drive home in silence, not listening to the radio, not even bothering to fish out a cig. I don't want to overdo it. I think about maybe heading out to the range and just shooting until my hands bleed, but I've got a dinner to get to.

I pull into my driveway, promptly ignore the tombstones, and enter my house to see Dustin at the kitchen table, homework scattered around him. "Hey!" I shout as a greeting, laughing when he jumps.

"Screw you!" He shouts back, clutching his chest. I laugh some more and walk over to join him in the kitchen, biting into my apple.

"Sorry."

"Whatever. Hey, are you okay?" He asks, pointing to his eyes. I swipe under mine, little black flecks popping up on my fingertips.

"Just a good old healthy cry fest. I'm good. The appointment was, well. The usual."

"And you're okay?" He asks, again. I sigh.

"I will be. I just have to get through this whole week."

"What do you mean."

"They call it the 'Anniversary Effect'." I explain, sitting across from him. "The closer I get to the day this all went to shit, the worse I'll be. But once it passes, I'll be fine."

"So... it'll get worse before it gets better?" He asks me, and I nod. He's out of his chair like a bolt of lightning struck him in the ass, and throws his arms around me, sitting on my lap like he's still tiny. "I

don't want you to get worse."

I tear up and glance at the ceiling. "I know, Dustin. I know."

---

Nancy breathes out heavily as Steve parks in the driveway of the Holland house, and I look at my hands. I've been silent the whole ride, Steve ignoring me, and Nancy trying to pull me into their conversations. "Are you two going to be like this the whole time." We don't speak. "Because if you are, I'm going to ignore both of you. That's right, give you a taste of your own medicine."

"Okay."

"Fine." Steve and I say, but we glare at each other as Nancy gets out first. I just roll my eyes and follow after her, crossing my arms over my flight jacket.

The couple walks in front of me, but I stop when I see a large FOR SALE sign on their manicured lawn. That wasn't there last week.

"Hey, Roni." Steve grabs my shoulders and I look up at him, trying not to let the tears fall. "I've got you. Nance has got you. It's going to be okay." He promises, and I nod shakily. Nancy holds out her hand and I take it without hesitation, letting her take the lead.

We stop and stare at the white door. "Okay. Ready?" Steve asks us, looking at me last.

"Ready."

"No." Nancy and I respond, and I glare at the ground. Steve knocks into me, honoring our temporary truce, and sighs heavily.

"Okay."

He rings the doorbell, and moments later Marsha Holland is opening the door, her smile so much like her daughter's. "Hello." She greets, all pleasant. "Come on in, dinner's ready."

"Thank you. It smells great." Steve takes the lead, and we calmly take off our shoes and jackets. I traded my school outfit in for a simple

pair of jeans and a green patterned sweater. Somehow I don't think what I was wearing would fly in this house.

Marsha hugs Nancy first, then pulls me into a tight hold. We break apart, no words said, and I watch as Steve shakes Mr. Holland's hand and Nancy gently, a little awkwardly, hugs the man. Mine is more sure, a testament to how often I've come over. Not that Nancy hasn't, but it's a little different for me. I owe it to the Hollands to be here as much as possible. I was the only one who could have saved their daughter, and I failed. And somehow they've never verbally faulted me for it.

We take a seat at the dining table, near cabinets covered in pictures of Barb. A shrine for a daughter they can't find, or, more accurately, won't be found. I sit at the head of the table, between Steve and Barb's dad. Nancy sits next to Steve - giving us both a look to behave ourselves - and Marsha sits next to her husband. We dig into the KFC, eating in a slightly awkward silence.

"I'm sorry I didn't get to cook." Marsha says, getting our attention. "I was gonna make that baked ziti you guys like so much, but I just forgot about the time, and before you know it, 'oh my God, it's five o'clock'."

"It's fine." Nancy assures her. "It's great."

"Right. I love KFC." Steve nods, and despite my irritation and the confused flutters in the stomach that *I just want to go away because I have Billy now and he's making me happy*, I smile down at my plate, carefully chewing on a biscuit.

I clear my throat and take a sip of water, staring at the Hollands. "We, uh, noticed the FOR SALE sign. Is that the neighbors', or..."

The Hollands look at each other. "You want to tell them?" Marsha asks, and her husband shakes his head, though they both look a little happy.

"Go ahead." He tells his wife, and she nods.

She looks at the three of us, still smiling softly. "We hired a man

named Murray Bauman. Have any of you heard of him?"

The couple shakes their head, but I nod. "Yeah. The private investigator. He talks to Hopper a lot." I don't mention how much Hopper complains about the conspiracy theorist, but the idea that they hired him doesn't actually make me too worried? Like, if anyone can figure out how to reveal everything that happened, it's a guy like him.

"Yes. He was an investigative journalist for the *Chicago Sun-Times*."

"He's pretty well known." Mr. Holland passes me the little card, and I check out the information before handing it over to Steve and Nancy, ignoring the tingling as the former's fingers touch mine. *Enough. Think about Billy, think about Billy.*

It works. *Thank God.*

Alright, feelings. You seriously need to get your shit together.

"Anyway, he's freelance now, and he's agreed to take the case." Marsha continues, and I smile. She looks at me. "That means we have someone who can help figure out what happened to you, too." The guilt eats away in my chest, but I still keep smiling.

"That's great." Steve nods. "That's uh, really great." We look at the silent Nancy, who drops her fork a bit.

"Um, what exactly does that mean?" She asks.

"Mean's he's gonna do what that lazy son of a bitch Jim Hop-" Marsha clears her throat and gently strokes her husband's elbow. He gives me an apologetic look, but I shrug. I'm still not really over how he's just let the Lab dictate how truth is handled. Her body could have still been returned. They could have come up with a story. They did it when they threw a dummy of Will Byers into the quarry. "Sorry." He continues, exhaling first. "What the Hawkins Police haven't been capable of doing." Mr. Holland finishes.

I smile gently up at the adults, my right hand under the table, clenching into a fist so hard I can feel my skin ripping a bit. "That's really good news. I'm... I'm glad you've got someone helping you. If

you need me to rehash what I know -"

Mr. Holland pats my left hand, gently. "Veronica, you've given us more than enough to help Mr. Bauman go off of. But we appreciate it, we really do." He smiles. "This all means that we have a real detective on the case."

Nancy takes a sip from her drink. I do the same. "It means... we're going to find our Barb."

I swallow dryly, holding in my sob.

"If anyone can find her, it's this man. He already has leads. By God, he's worth every last penny." Mr. Holland tells us, voice shaking. Steve looks between Nancy and I.

"Is that why you're selling the house?" I ask, clenching my fist harder.

"Don't worry about us, sweetie." Marsha tells me, then Nancy. "We're fine. More than fine. For the first time in a long time, we're hopeful."

Nancy looks down at her plate, lip quivering a bit. "Ex-excuse me. I'll be right back." She stammers, standing up.

I nod and join her. "Me too."

"Of course, take your time." Marsha gives us an understanding look, and we both disappear down the hall.

I enter the bathroom first, and Nancy gasps when she sees my hand. "C'mon, we have to get it clean." She closes the door behind her and runs my hand under the cool water until what little blood there was fades.

As she washes my hand, she starts to pant. Heavily. Like she's starting to have a panic attack. "Nance." I whisper, and she shakes her head, looking briefly at a picture of our late friend next to her before placing it face-down. She shakily walks over to the bathtub and sits on the edge, sobbing quietly as tears roll down her cheeks. I follow her, my body reacting the same way to the Hollands' news. As I sit next to her we pull each other into a hug, crying in opposite shoulders.

"It isn't fair. This...t-this isn't okay." She whispers. I nod.

"I k-know."

"I'm sorry. I'm so so-sorry."

"Why are you apologizing?" I ask, shoulders still shaking as we speak with muffled voices but my voice more controlled than hers.

"I-I. I've b-been. Been pretend. Pretending. T-that ever-everything wo-would. Would b-be..."

"Okay."

"I. I sh-shouldn't have. I-I should. Should've been. Be-been helping you. With B-Barb. To shu-shut down -"

"Hawkins Lab." She nods into my shoulder. I blink then sit up, moving her shoulders back to stare into her very blue eyes. "M-maybe we can."

"W-what?"

"I'm tired of letting those people ruin lives." I growl. "I won't be a toy for them to play with. Hawkins isn't theirs."

She nods, and wipes away her tears, calmer. "We can get in touch with the investigator."

"He'll believe us. But we'll need proof."

"If we do this... there's a chance the Hollands can get hurt. That our families will be hurt." Nancy cautiously reminds me. I nod.

"Then we'll give it a couple of days. Mull over everything. Be absolutely sure."

"Okay. It's a deal." We give each other a comforting look, then arms are wrapped back around bodies, small sobs wracking through us once more.

---

I toss and turn in bed, the moonlight pouring in through my window and catching on my dad's framed Purple Heart and the pressed gardenias. I look at my right thumb and wiggle it around, missing the weight that used to be there.

I can just wear another ring. It isn't a big deal.

My mom welcomed me home from Barb's with open arms, Mews actually rubbing her head against my leg before hissing at me and slinking away. My mom made me a big mug of hot chocolate, and Dustin made sure to fill it to the brim with mini marshmallows.

But it's not enough to quiet the guilt rolling in my stomach, or the hairs rising on the back of my neck the later it gets. I huff and sit up, reaching over to turn on my muted lamp. With a whisper of a groan I bury my head in my comfort-covered knees, imagining Billy is next to me, holding me like he did the night he asked me to be his. Officially.

It works, but only until the lamp beside me flickers. I look at it and hiss, panicking as I try to turn it off. Before my hand reaches the switch it flicks off, and my room is covered in vines.

I get out of bed, beyond pissed that I can't just have one good night.

"It'll get worse before it gets better. It'll get worse before it gets better." I tell myself out loud, then move over to my window, staring out at the blue sky. White flecks rain down around me and outside my Upside Down house. The thunder starts to roll, and that feeling like something is hunting me comes back full-force, only a tingle running through my body reassures me that it's starting to give up. The hair on the back of my neck still stands up, warning me of nearby danger. Its like I have "Spidey sense" or something.

I keep looking skyward, hands on my windowsill avoiding the vines. They're ignoring me now, too.

The dark blue and cloudy sky suddenly fills with red lightning, and I watch in horror as the shadowy creature starts to appear. I cover my mouth with both hands, swallowing my scream as it seems to grow ten times, filling the sky with its gargantuan form. The shadow looms over it's land, it's head is like some elongated tear, or maybe a flame.



It's got multiple limbs, like some sort of bug - skinny and thick, short and long appendages reaching out over everything. It doesn't look my way, though. But it does roar. It's loud enough for me to hear over the thunder and I cover my ears, falling to my knees and closing my eyes -

And then I shoot up in bed, panting hard, my copy of Lord of the Flies open next to me, like I'd fallen asleep reading. My lamp is still on, dim as always. The moonlight still pours in. The vines are gone, the ash is gone. There's no more thunder, or flashes of red. It's just me, in bed, still losing my mind.

I reach over and turn off my lamp, lying back down. Only one question floats through my mind as I calm my breathing and try to drift back to sleep.

*Was it all I dream? Or is the second time a coincidence?*

## 11. Trick-or-Treat, Freak

Hi all, and welcome to my *Stranger Things* Steve Harrington/OC story! It's been a long, long time coming. Seriously. Since 2017 long.

In this story, we've got the Ice Queen of Hawkins, the older-but-shorter-by-season 2 sister of Dustin Henderson, because he deserves an older sibling. She's Veronica, and even though *Heathers* came out in 1989 I've taken the liberty of borrowing some of my favorite quotes because *Winona Ryder Easter Eggs*. Seriously, I cannot overstate my love for that movie. Anyway, there's more of a backstory for the Henderson family, including adding the dad to the "asshole fathers club", co-president with Lonnie Byers, the prick. Expect explicit language because, hello, *Stranger Things* isn't known for censoring language.

Fair warning, while this is a Steve/OC fic, the season 2 part will include Billy/OC, but not for long. I promise. He's a great character, but he's a dick until he isn't. Just wanted to get that out of the way. Because again, he's a dick. And don't worry, his ST2 behavior does not go unchecked by Veronica, so there won't be any sweeping his choices under the rug. However, I'm also treating their relationship a bit like Jackson Whittemore and Lydia Martin's from *Teen Wolf*, especially with the later outcome. And there will also be inbetween chapters between ST1 and ST2, then ST2 and ST3, adding some more things as well as a deeper dive into how Max and Billy's relationship changes, because let's be honest that wasn't really commented on in ST3, and I'd like to see it. But this will not be a Billy Hargrove/OC endgame story. Not like that. Also, I'm so glad you guys are liking how I'm writing Billy. It was important for me to show you the potential of who he could be if he stopped following in his dad's footsteps. Also, their relationship allows for us to see another side of Billy that wasn't touched on. Just be patient with everything! While this relationship isn't "endgame", it will still be important to both characters. Also, don't take her lingering feelings for Steve as her using Billy to get over him. While initially she thought of him as a fun little distraction, the first

date had her hooked. Just remember she's been in love with Steve for a few years now, and that's not something you get over in 15 days. Just want to clarify that - the relationship problems that will transpire between Billy and Veronica (again, they aren't endgame, but i will be writing an AU Billy/OC fic soon) are not about her feelings for Steve. It'd be a disservice to Billy and Veronica to make it all shallow rather than direct consequences to Billy's actions in the second season. Again, it's actions over feelings that dictate the outcome of their relationship. Also, just because this is a Steve/OC fic it does not mean I'll be letting his behavior towards Veronica in the next few chapters - and her with him - go unchecked. These are teenagers who are not perfect, and no relationship is perfect. Just something to keep in mind in case either one of them piss you off. But they learn from their mistakes, and they learn how to grow up while coping with their trauma healthily, which wasn't what happened for them between the events of ST1 and ST2.

Alright, here's 2x02/Trick-or-Treat, Freak. This chapter's a bit long, but includes three 3rd person POVs, a flashback, and a brief "hallucination." We've got more Billy/Veronica scenes, a fun little scene with Billy, Veronica, and Max. Nancy and Veronica talk more, making their decision about exposing the Hawkins Lab as well as Veronica talking about what she's been seeing. There's some more Tommy/Carol/Vicki/Nicole bashing, Tina is still a gem. There are also a few scenes with Veronica getting along with the other three girls. BIG ANGST near the end, with a vicious argument between Steve and Veronica after Nancy rips out Steve's heart. It's something I've been planning since the start of this story, and it's the first time Steve is open about his feelings without actually revealing them to Veronica, because both are oblivious dumbasses when it comes to each other.

Enjoy the story! I only own Veronica.

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I finish sketching a small doodle of the new monster haunting my dreams, the image resting right under my detailed description. Even

though I managed to sleep a few more hours, my mind refused to forget anything I saw. It's all there, joining the collection of observed nightmares and sketches of vines.

I close my notebook and tuck it into the drawer of my desk, arrow ring glinting next to it. My urge to put it back on has started to fade, but there's still a pull. I ignore it though, slamming the drawer shut. The weather isn't supposed to be too bad today, and anyway I'm getting a ride from Billy which means I can just ask to borrow his jacket, like most girlfriends ask of their boyfriends.

I leave my room, the skirt of my black, long-sleeved pleated dress swishing around my thighs, revealing my long white socks. The heels of my burgundy knee-high boots click as I walk, backpack slung over my shoulder.

My mom's busy taking pictures of Dustin in his homemade Ghostbusters costume. Seriously. I even helped her with the patch. He's going as Stantz, which is pretty on the nose considering their personalities.

"You look great, D!" I call, clapping. "Mom, can I have a picture? For my locker."

Dustin groans, but I grin at his blush. "God, you're so embarrassing."

"I'm so sorry I love you, Chewie. Forgive me for my slight!" I dramatically beg. I take the still developing picture and tuck it safely in a notebook. "You sure you're okay biking?"

"Mhmm! Go out and be merry!"

"You aren't driving him?" She asks, and before I can stop big mouth, he just has to talk.

"No. Her boyfriend's taking her to school."

"Boyfriend?!" My mom screeches happily. "Oh, sweetheart! Who is he? What is he like?"

I blink. "Um, I don't know what he's talking about?"

"No, seriously, she has a boyfriend. I saw them kissing after school, it was pretty gross."

"Dustin." I growl, about to lunge for him.

My mom only waves me off. "Oh, hush. What's his name?"

"Billy Hargrove." I sing like a canary. "He's new. He just moved here from California. We met at Big Buy, we went on a few dates, he asked me out."

She looks a little hurt, and I glare over at a guilty Dustin. "Oh."

"Mom, I'm sorry I didn't tell you sooner. I promise I was going to. It's just very new, and I'm not sure just how serious we are." I throw my arms around her. "I swear I wasn't going to just keep it to myself."

"Oh, I know dumpling. It's okay. Trust me, I was worse when I was your age. I could count the guys on -"

"Mom!" Dustin shrieks, and I laugh. He doesn't see the wink my mom gives me, meaning she's just messing around.

"I'll invite him over for dinner this weekend, okay?" I ask, nervously shifting.

"That sounds great, sweetheart." Just then the doorbell rings, and I go to answer it. "Oh, is that him?" She asks innocently, smirking eerily similar to myself at the blush creeping up on my cheeks.

"Mom!" It's my turn to shriek, and I pull the door open.

Billy's standing on the other side, amused. But when he sees my mom coming he straightens, quickly zipping up his jacket. I snort, but let his anxiousness go. "Oh, you must be Billy!"

I close my eyes, and Billy laughs a bit under his breath, but turns on his most charming smile. "Hi, Mrs. Henderson. It's nice to meet you." He offers his hand and she shakes it, and though she's definitely a little drawn to his flame, she's not like most suburban moms who get easily swayed by charm.

"Claudia, dear. You can call me Claudia. Well, I'll let you two get to school. Have a good day, dumpling." She kisses my cheek and I fail to not blush at her nickname. Thankfully Dustin yells out for our mom, demanding her immediate attention. She simply rolls her eyes fondly and disappears into the living room.

I rush to close the door and grab the sleeve of Billy's jacket, running down my driveway. "Jesus, baby girl." He grumbles, then shoots me a teasing look when we reach his car. "Or do you prefer 'dumpling'."

I point my finger at him. "I can and will kill you, Hargrove."

He snorts but walks around the Camaro to let me in. Max looks up from her skateboard, staring at me like she's reading into my soul before she rolls her eyes and leans back. "Good morning, Max."

She lifts her head, seeming surprised that I remembered her name. "Morning, Veronica." She greets, then returns to her previous position.

Billy gets back in and turns on his engine, slowly driving from my house. I give him a concerned look, and he huffs. "Your mom and brother were watching us from the window."

"That's why I ran, California." I tell him. "Also, she wants you to come over for dinner this weekend."

"Free food? I've got no problem with that. How did she find out about us, anyway? I thought we were going to tell her later?" He asks, speeding up a bit the further we get from my house.

I cross my arms haughtily and glare ahead. "You can blame my loudmouth brother for that shit."

"Did you let him get away with it?" He asks me, and I shrug.

"Yeah. I did."

"What? Why?" He asks, confused. He pulls out a couple of cigarettes and passes me one, and I make sure to blow the smoke out the window.

"He's my brother, Billy. Younger siblings are supposed to be little shits. Besides, I'm just gonna retaliate by hiding his Halloween candy around the house. It's a time-honored tradition."

Billy rolls his eyes but briefly leans over to kiss the side of my head. "Your mom seems nice."

"Yeah." I lean over and unzip his jacket so his mostly-unbuttoned shirt is back on display. "Nice save. Very smooth."

He huffs at me and lightly pushes me away, and I laugh at him. "I didn't want to give her the wrong idea."

Max makes a noise in the back, and I turn to see the disbelieving look on her face. "Got something to say, *Maxine*?" Billy sings out, and the calm mood becomes tense.

Hell no. I had a rough night. I'm not dealing with this shit.

"How're you liking Hawkins so far, Max?" I ask her, flicking my finished cig out the window and turning to look back at her.

She gives me a surprised look again, then shrugs. "It's alright. It isn't California."

"Yeah, I guess not. Hey, there's a pretty decent skate park a few blocks from the start of Loch Nora. Have you been there yet?"

"No, I haven't. How do you know about it?" She asks me, eyes flicking over my dress. I grin, and shrug.

"Skateboards were never really my thing, but I taught my brother how to ride his bike there."

"Oh. Thank you. For telling me." She awkwardly says. "There isn't much to do here, is there?"

I laugh, and Billy throws me a soft smile. "No. There really isn't. But you'll learn to get pretty creative. It isn't all bad. At least we've got an arcade."

"Yeah, even if a dick works there."

"Ah, so you've met Keith."

"Keith?" Billy asks, getting both of our attention. "Cheetos Puffs Keith?"

I nod. "Mhm. He isn't too bad. He's just an... acquired taste."

"Yeah, that no one's acquired." Max mumbles, and I laugh before looking at my boyfriend, reaching up to run my hand through his dark blonde curls. He lets me, throwing in a wink.

"How do you even know him?" I ask.

Billy tosses his cig out the window. "He sat next to me in biology. I could smell the fake cheese 30 minutes after class ended. Tommy filled me in on who he is." My nose wrinkles at his name.

"Keith's nice when you get to know him. He's just very guarded. But yes, he can be a bit of a dick." I wink into the rearview mirror, and Max grins. She becomes a little more relaxed, eventually leaning forward enough that we can have a conversation face-to-face.

We're talking about how cool Mr. Clarke is by the time Billy parks by the high school. He's the first one out of the car, rushing over to help me out before moving the seat. Max climbs out and gives me a real smile. "You're pretty cool." She comments, before dropping her board and skating down to the middle school.

"Such a weirdo." Billy comments, voice a little harsh.

I turn around and wrap my arms around his neck. "Look, I know you two don't get along, but I'm glad she seems to like me."

"Her opinion doesn't matter." He growls, though the anger isn't directed at me.

"Doesn't it? The more she likes me, the less likely she'll cause problems for us with Neil. Right?"

He sighs and closes his eyes, nodding. "Yeah."

"Oh, I almost forgot." I lean up on the balls of my feet and press my



mouth to his, smiling when his hands grip my hips and tug me closer. His back crashes into the passenger door but we don't break apart. Not for a few more moments, anyway, when we need air.

He moves some blonde curls from my face and grins. "Now that's a great way to start my morning."

"Charmer."

"Ditto, baby girl." I laugh then shiver a bit as the wind picks up, and Billy gives me a smirk. "You know, usually you have your flight jacket to keep you warm."

I bite my lip. Busted. Good. So I smile coyly. "Forgot it at home. Silly me."

He chuckles and leans forward, pressing our foreheads together. "You're not slick."

"But I am cold. So warm me up, Hargrove."

He nods and presses our lips together again, wrapping one hand around the back of my head while the other stays on my hip. He laughs as I still shiver a bit, and removes both of his hands from me so he can shrug off his leather jacket and place it around my shoulders, not once breaking the kiss. Memories of him covering our bodies with it the first night make me blush a bit and I pull away, smiling. "Better?" He asks, and I laugh. He gently moves me back so he can turn and grab my backpack and his notebook. Both items in one hand and the other entwined with mine, we walk towards the school. As we pass by some trees, my mind flashes back to my latest nightmare, and I find myself holding onto Billy a little tighter.

---

I walk out of the school and towards the parking lot, backpack still in my locker thanks to our teacher's recognizing no one would be getting their homework done tonight and therefore didn't assign shit. They probably want a break, too. Students move around me, letting me through. Not that I'm completely aware right now. The more time I spent rifling through text books and seeing pictures of roots and dark shadows, the easier it was for my mind to play tricks on me. I

slipped down the rabbit hole of "was it all a dream, or was it real?" Which is such a mind-fuck.

"There you are, baby girl." I startle a bit when I look up and see Billy standing at his car with a few new followers - including Tommy and Carol. I nearly drop my house keys in the process. "You okay?" He asks, worry clear in his eyes. I definitely look more exhausted than earlier, and that includes during lunch when Billy was practically feeding me, playing it off as being romantic to his followers even though I could read the concern in his eyes.

"Yeah, just tired. Physics was so damn boring."

"Probably doesn't help you've got a band nerd for a partner, huh?" Tommy asks.

I narrow my eyes. "Actually, Robin's great. Mr. Lewis is the problem."

"I have him third period. He's awful." Carol actually agrees with me, and I gesture to her while staring at her freckled boyfriend. He pouts, probably because I didn't take the bait in my newly-usual violent way. The pout fades, though, as he stares over my shoulder.

"Heads up, Ice Queen. Princess is on her way. Doesn't look like Harrington's too happy, though. You two have another falling out?" He asks me, smirking and smacking his gum. I briefly glance up to see my boyfriend clenching his jaw as he glares at his new best friend, completely unimpressed. I gently kiss the muscle, smiling as it relaxes a bit, and turn around to see Nancy.

She's confidently striding towards us, eyes narrowed at Carol, Tommy, and Nicole, but all smiles when it comes to me and Tina. "Sorry to interrupt. But I need you, Vera."

I clutch at my chest. "Aw, those are the words I like to hear, Nance."

She rolls her eyes affectionately. "I don't know if you have plans, but I need someone to shop with for tonight."

"Nance, I don't do 'shopping'." I use air quotes. "No, don't you dare." I warn her, and she makes her blue eyes grow as wide as mine, lip quivering just a touch. "It's not going to work."

"Oh, come on!"

Against my wishes - and probably thinking by being protective of me he'll win more points with Billy - Tommy throws an arm over my shoulders, Carol walking around to stand on my other side, arms crossed and hip cocked. "Oh, princess. I think you're confusing our Ice Queen for one of your bitches. The ones you have are male. They're still male, right? You're not holding onto Harrington's balls for him? Or Byers's?"

I shove Tommy off. "Hey, dipshit, did you forget that Jonathan is my best friend?" He pales a bit, stepping away. "Don't talk to Nancy like that. And besides, Carol's had your balls for years." I defend Steve without having to say his name, and Billy laughs, clapping his hands a bit.

"Told you she's all fire!" I blow him a kiss and he winks at me.

With a sigh I turn back to Nancy, who's gone back to her pout. "Jesus, fine. If it gets you to stop. Harrington isn't driving us, is he?"

"Yes. Just, I need some girl time. I'll even pay for your strawberry milkshake." She pleads, and there's a pain in her blue eyes that I was too distracted to notice before.

Without missing a beat I nod. "Okay, fine. But we need to stop at my place first. I need my wallet."

"You still don't have costume?" Tina asks me, breaking off her conversation with Vicki.

"You literally just told me about the party yesterday." I remind her, laughing when she glares and tries to throw a crumpled up piece of paper at me.

"Are you two doing a couple costume?" She innocently asks Billy and I. We look at each other and shrug.

"Your call, Queen V." My boyfriend smiles down at me, though I catch him glaring over my shoulder. Probably at Steve.

"Why don't we just go as our own thing... play out a fun little

fantasy." I suggest, running my fingers down his chest. He leers at me and pulls me into a kiss.

"Oh, you are so getting it later."

"Can't wait. You're picking me up, right?"

"Mhmm. We're still on for going to yours, first?" Billy asks Tommy, who relishes in the brief attention.

"Hell yeah. I've already got the booze."

"Okay. I'll get you at 5?" Billy asks, then starts shrugging off his brown leather jacket and hands it to me.

"What's this for?"

"Well, this is so you don't miss me too much while you're out shopping." The girls all coo, and I roll my eyes but blush nonetheless, thankfully hiding it in Billy's neck as he hugs me. "Besides, I've got my jean jacket in the car."

"Okay. Thanks, Billy. I'll see you at 5."

"You got it, baby girl. Go have fun. Later, Wheeler." He nods to Nancy, who gives him a small wave and holds out her hand to me. I snort and take it, letting her whisk me towards the irritated Steve.

"He seems... interesting." She states as we walk. "I don't like that he's friends with Tommy and Carol."

"Pretty sure friends is a loose term. But yeah. I don't like it either."

"Steve was ready to storm over when he saw them waiting by Billy's car. He thought you were being ambushed." Nancy gently informs me.

I growl. "I don't need his protection. Besides, we're not exactly friends right now, are we?"

"God, it was one stupid disagreement! You're both so dramatic." She bemoans, a little hypocritical as we approach Steve. He meekly gets

in the Beemer and starts the engine, body tense.

Well, this will be a fun ride.

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*3rd Person (Billy's POV)...*

Billy watched as his flock finally dispersed, each having to get ready for the party tonight. It's not like he actually wanted to hang out with these assholes, but it meant getting away from Neil, getting drunk off his ass, and dancing with his girl.

His girlfriend. It's the most surprising thing about Hawkins. That his third day here, he met a girl songs were written about. The minute he saw her silky blonde curls and big emerald eyes, he knew he was hooked. Sure, realistically she's tiny. A damn pixie, if he's being honest. But she seems bigger than she really is. It's no wonder she's royalty at school. Who wouldn't bow down to a girl like her? Someone who doesn't flaunt their power, who doesn't have to be a dick to the entire student body to command respect. Not that she's above violence. He knows a fighter when he sees one.

Dammit, she'd probably make a guy like Neil Hargrove her bitch. He'd love to see that. His prick of a dad having to submit to a girl half his height. She's probably teach him all about "respect and responsibility."

Billy sighs and leans back against his car, waiting for Maxine to show. It's getting late, he's got shit to do, and a girl to impress. Maybe he should go as Sodapop Curtis. Everyone loves The Outsiders, right? Besides, he'd give Rob Lowe a run for his money.

He straightens when the familiar sound of Max's skateboard comes rolling towards him, and without turning around he announces to his bitch of a stepsister, "You're late again."

"Yeah, I had to get catch-up homework." She tells him while opening the passenger door, like it matters. Like he won't catch shit from Neil if they're both late getting home.

"Jesus, I don't care." He responds, talking back to her over his

shoulder. "You're late again, and you're skating home." He warns, before walking over to the driver's side.

"Where's Veronica?" Max asks, sounding a little put-off. And he'd never say this out loud, but he wishes his girlfriend was here to act as a buffer, because she made Max more tolerable than his stepsister has been in years.

"Shopping with a friend." Is all he says, getting in and starting the engine, "Wango Tango" by Ted Nugent pouring out of the radio as he zooms away from the school, driving over the speed limit as they pass by a field. One of many. "God, this place is such a shithole." He groans, drumming lightly on the wheel.

"It's not that bad." Max says, softly, and he looks at her in disbelief.

"No?" He reaches over and lowers her window, breathing in deeply and covering his nose at the smell. "You smell that, Max? That's actually shit. Cow shit."

"I don't see any cows." She argues, but it lacks fire.

"Clearly you haven't met the high-school girls." Billy tells her as she brings her window back up.

"Does that include Veronica?" Max asks him, and he looks down at her. His need to fight with her dies down when she mentions his girlfriend's name. "Is she a cow?"

"Jesus, Max, have you seen her? She look like a cow to you?" He questions, seriously wondering if she needs glasses.

"No. No, she's beautiful. And nice. And funny. So why is she with you?"

"Very funny, Max." He growls. It's a good question, though. One that haunts him, every time he thinks about throwing a fist or breaking something. Why him? She isn't shallow enough to be doing it just 'cause the sex is good and he's fun.

And if he's with her, will he damage her even more than she already believes she is? Is he making her better, like she's doing for him? Or

is he making things worse?

He doesn't have the answers, though. So Billy decides it's time to change the subject. He scoffs. "So what, you like it here now?"

"No."

"Then why are you defending it?"

"I'm not." She argues.

"Sure sounds like it." He keeps his eyes on the road, the memory of Veronica wrapped up in his leather jacket calming his rage just enough that he doesn't throttle his stepsister to death. It's her fault they're here, anyway. She just had to open her big mouth about his tryst in the backseat. It isn't his fault he got payback. It felt so good, telling his dad that she was still talking to her birth father, even though Mr. Mayfield was a better man than Neil could ever dare to be.

Max sighs. "It's just, we're stuck here..."

"Mhmm. And who's fault is that?" He asks, rolling his head to the side to stare at her. "You're right. We're stuck here. And whose fault is that?"

"Yours." She mutters, glaring out the window.

Billy starts to see red, and he clenches his hands on the steering wheel. "What'd you say?"

"Nothing."

"Did you say it's my fault?"

"No."

He growls. "You know who's fault it is. Say it. Max... Say it. SAY IT!" He screams at her, pleased when she jumps like a scared little rabbit. He switches gears and drives even faster, full on banging against his steering wheel.

"Billy, slow down!" She tries to order, and he notices the three kids on bikes, too. One looks a little familiar from behind, but he's too far away to know who it is.

Not that he cares. Not if it means scaring Max into submission. "Oh, these your new hick friends?"

"No! But one of them -"

"Aw, you've got a boyfriend. Little Maxine is acting like a big girl now, huh?" He laughs, speeding up.

"No, no, Billy! Billy, don't!" She pleads, but he's a little too far gone.

"What? You gonna cry if I hit 'em? I get bonus points, I get 'em all in one go?" Billy screams over the music, rage taking over. Not even Veronica's smile can bring him back right now. There's so much in his head. Neil, his mom leaving, frail little Susan who ignores what his old man does. Max being Neil's favorite, despite not even being his.

"No, Billy, stop! It's not funny! Seriously, you don't want to do this!" He turns his head slowly, uncaring as he keeps drumming along to Ted Nugent. The three kids start to bike a little harder. "Billy, come on, stop it. It's not funny. Stop!" He grins wickedly as the kids start biking out of control, crashing into each other as they try to get off the road. "Billy, stop it!" The tires screech as Max dives over and yanks the wheel to the side, steering them off course.

"Yeah, that was a close one, huh?" He screams, blood pumping and head on fire as he laughs.

"You idiot!" She screams at him, and he glares at her. She only flinches a little. "The one with the curly hair?"

"What about him, Mad Max?" He yells back, gleeful. "He your boyfriend?"

"No! He's Veronica's little brother!" She screams at him, and the news shocks him enough that it's his turn to steer out of control.

*Shit. Shit, shit, shit, shit.*



"You tell her, and you're dead. You hear me? Don't you dare ruin what we have!" Billy warns. "Do you understand?"

"I'm not the one you have to be worried about. Her brother's got a big mouth, remember?" Max asks, haughtily.

*I fucked up I fucked I fucked up* plays in his mind on a loop. "I said, do you understand?!" He screams at her, trying not to tear up when he thinks about making his girl sad.

"I understand! I understand." Max tells him, voice shaking with fear.

Fuck.

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*3rd Person (Dustin's POV)...*

Dustin brushes the dirt off of his hands and costume, staring after the blue car in shock. Mad Max was there, with her stepbrother. His sister's boyfriend.

"It was just a stupid prank." He thinks to himself, quickly checking on a terrified Mike and Lucas. *"I can't tell Leia. I can't. She's finally happy. Even if it's with the wrong guy, she's happy. I can't ruin it for her. Not when she's dealing with the Anniversary Effect."*

So instead he gets back on his bike, and hopes his best friends haven't pieced together that the guy who just pretended to run them down is dating their favorite babysitter.

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*Veronica's POV...*

I stand in front of my bathroom mirror, adjusting my old grey bomber jacket - unused until now - and fixing the v-neck of my pink tie-dye shirt. It's tucked into tight, high-waisted jeans, the hems of my pants rolled up a bit and tucked into white tube socks. My new white converse are in pristine condition, though probably not for long. As I tease my hair like Linda Hamilton's, my mind drifts down memory lane.

*Steve dropped us off by Melvald's with only a kiss for Nancy. He doesn't*

look at me, and I try not to feel like I'd lost someone important. Nancy just sighed at our behavior and got out. I followed after her, warm thanks to Billy's jacket. Thankfully, she decided against commenting further on our fight. Instead she whisked me into Mira's Boutique, the bell ringing above the door as we entered. "So, who are you going as?"

"Lana, from Risky Business. I have a skirt, I just need a similar top and a little black bow-tie. Steve already dresses like Tom Cruise's character."

"Joel Goodsen." I told her, and Nancy shrugged.

"Honestly, I didn't really pay attention to the movie."

"Dude, it was so good!" I complained, and she stared at me, a sad look on her face. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing. I'm just... just thinking."

"You think too hard sometimes, Nance." I told her, rifling through some sweaters until I pulled out an off-white one with a slight turtleneck - nothing too constricting. "Think this will work? It's definitely your size."

She smiled and took it. "Yeah, it's perfect. Personally I think it'd look better on you. Cream colors always make me look paler."

"Shut up, you're beautiful. You think they have a pink tie-dye top here? And tube socks. And white shoes. I guess I could go to Melvald's for that, though."

"No need, I see some stuff in the back!" Nancy pointed past the retail clerk, and carefully folded her sweater over her arm as we walked.

I couldn't take the silence, though. "Seriously, Nance, what's going on? You're never this quiet."

"Just..." She sighed and looked around. "I was thinking about what you said, last night. At Barb's. I've been running every possible scenario through my head, and I want to do it. I want to expose them." She whispered. "But I talked to Steve -"

"You told him our plan?" I hissed. She shook her head.

*"No, no. I just told him I was tired of pretending. I'm always pretending now, about everything. I'm sorry for that."*

*"Nance -"*

*"No, it was wrong of me to act like everything was alright. I promised you I'd be there, and it feels like I haven't. I promise to do better. Anyway, Steve just said we couldn't do anything. That our hands are tied, which is such bullshit. So now we're going to a party and pretending like we're just normally teens." She finished, then reached onto a rack of tie-dyes until she pointed to one I may like. It was perfect. Probably a little big on me, but it was close enough to the colors from the movie. I pulled it off the hangar and slipped off the leather jacket to tug it over my dress. It was a little baggy, but the looser the better, especially if I'm going to be dancing all night.*

*"I'm sorry he wasn't... supportive." I sighed. "I get it, though. Technically, he's right about our hands being tied. We'd be risking the lives of people we care about. But for Barb and her parents... wouldn't it be worth it?" I asked her, rhetorically. She smiled and nodded as I tugged the top off and pulled Billy's jacket back on.*

*"Maybe Jonathan would help us?"*

*"Probably." I shrugged. "Nancy?"*

*"Yeah?" She asked, leading me to the shoes. "What's wrong?"*

*"I need to tell you something. It's... it isn't good."*

*"Holy shit, are you pregnant?" She nearly screeched, but thankfully she managed to contain her voice.*

*I sputter. "No! No, I'm safe. Always! Jesus Christ, Nance."*

*"Sorry." She blushed. "Okay, what's wrong?"*

*"You know how sometimes I have these, um, episodes?"*

*"I thought you said they'd stopped." She stared down at me, frowning.*

*I bit my lip. "I lied. They never went away. They've gotten worse."*

*"Maybe we should talk about -"*

*"They already know." I told her, clearly referring to people at Hawkins Lab. "And they've said it's just due to the Anniversary Effect."*

*"Yeah. I could see that. What happens, though? What's got you so shaken?" She asked me.*

*I sighed. "The episodes, they've changed. They still mess with my head. But it isn't just the vines and the ash anymore. Now there's thunder, too. And red lightning. And a giant, shadowy... thing. And I always feel like something's trying to find me, but it can't."*

*She pulled me into a hug. "I'm so sorry. That sounds terrifying."*

*"That's just the thing! I'm not... I'm never terrified. A little scared, but I feel safe? It's more like a warning. And whatever's looking for me... it's like the Upside Down's stopped caring about me. The vines don't even try and grab me anymore."*

*"What makes you say it's just a dream? And what makes you think it's real?" She asked, blue eyes analyzing me.*

*"Well, when I had the one last night, I woke up in bed, like I'd never gotten out. But the first one had been when I was awake, after Jonathan and I saw The Terminator. The doc says everything will get worse before it gets better."*

*"Hey. You're the strongest person I know. Thank you, for telling me. I won't... I'm not going to tell anyone. Not Steve, and not even Jonathan. I promise."*

*I squeezed her hands. "Thank you. Now come on, we've got to finish up."*

*I blink back into the present when my doorbell rings. My mom's still at work, but I have no doubt she'll be home within an hour so she can hand out candy and cuddle with Mews.*

*The doorbell rings again and I slide out of the bathroom, jogging over to my front door. "Jesus, relax!" I shout, but excitedly open it. "Holy shit." I mutter, staring directly at my boyfriend's naked torso. He's wearing a black leather jacket, but it's wide open to reveal his pecs*

and abs.

Billy chews his gum, smirking at me devilishly. "Like what you see?"

I jump onto him, wrapping my legs around his waist and moaning when he lets out a groan and carries me inside, turning and slamming me against the now closed door. His hands are on my jean clad ass, and our mouths move together like it's a damn race. "Oh. Oh my God. B-Billy!" I whimper as he trails his lips down to the base of my throat and sucks like he's a goddamn vampire. "Do we have to go to Tommy's?"

His mouth leaves my new hickey and he holds me up with one hand, the other one tugging at my teased locks. "I know you don't like him, but it's free alcohol and I get to show off my ridiculously hot girlfriend."

"I hate him." I correct Billy. "And Carol, and Vicki. Nicole. Drew. Mike. Kyle."

"Yeah, yeah. But knowing them has helped me adjust to school."

"You mean gain popularity?" I correct.

"Says the Ice Queen."

I glare. "Yeah. But I was only called that because I would freeze those types of kids with harsh words, especially if they were belittling others for being different." I passionately tell him. He starts to frown. "They aren't the kind of people who'll help you in the long run, Billy."

"I don't want them to be. They're stepping stones." I raise my eyebrows. "Shit, I didn't mean that. I meant that as the new kid, I need more than just a smoking hot babe of a girlfriend to make it through high school."

"Look, I don't want to fight -"

"I don't either. I'm sorry. We can skip Tommy's -"

"No." I shake my head and let him slide me down so my feet touch the ground. "We can go. We should go. Being in a relationship means

compromising, right? And caring about the person you're with. I care about you, Billy. And if you want to go drink with those assholes, I'm coming with you."

"Thanks. I care about you, too."

"I should hope so."

"You ready to go?" He asks me, and I nod.

"Yeah, I just have to grab something from the bathroom." He follows me as I walk into my prepping zone, watching as I touch up my mascara and reapply my strawberry Lip Smacker, shoving the red tube in the front pocket of my jeans. Besides those two items, I'm not wearing any other makeup. There's nothing worse than sweating off your hard work and leaving a party looking more wrecked than one of the Jaws victims. I smile at him through the mirror. "What?"

"You're so beautiful." I blush a bit and laugh, turning to walk back up to him and stroke his abs.

"You're so hot." I tell him, and he grins. It starts to fade, though, and I frown. "What's wrong?"

"Where's your mom? And your brother?" He asks me, though he sounds a little worried about the latter.

"Um, mom's still at work. Don't worry, she knows I'm going out. She practically begged me to, when I told her last night. And I haven't seen Dustin since this morning. He went straight to his one of his friends' house so they could get a head start Trick-or-Treating."

He smiles, looking a little relieved. "Oh. Okay. I just wasn't ready for an ambush, especially not looking like this."

I laugh at him and tug him out of the bathroom, turning off the light as I go and nearly stepping on Mews. She rubs against my leg, making sure to stain my white sock in order to counter the nice gesture. She hisses at Billy, though, and I smile. "Thank God. I thought she only hated me."

"Why would she hate you?"

"I stepped on her a couple of times. By accident." I clarify. "Sometimes we get along. I think she's just jealous that I have opposable thumbs, and she doesn't."

Billy laughs at me this time and we leave my house. I lock up behind me and make sure the front light is on, avoiding the cemetery and getting into the passenger seat, Billy opening and closing it for me.

He gets in, and I tilt my head. "Who the hell are you supposed to be, by the way?" I ask. "I mean, you look good, but who are you dressed as?"

"I'm an Outsider!"

"Yeah, which one?" I ask, smirking at him.

"Sodapop Curtis. Tell me, do I look better than Rob Lowe, or what?" I snort, but sort of see the resemblance in the eyes.

"You just wanted an excuse to be shirtless." I tell him, laughing as he blushes while pulling out of my driveway and presumably heading to Tommy's.

"No. Not only."

"Cute. But I can see the resemblance. You're definitely bigger though." I look up at him through my eyelashes when he glances down at me, and he moans.

"Stop teasing me, baby girl. Who are you supposed to be?"

"Sarah Connor. From *The Terminator*." I smile up at him.

He shrugs. "Haven't seen it yet. You look hot, Queen V. But from what I've seen in the trailer, you've definitely got bigger boobs than Linda Hamilton." I laugh and slap his chest. He rubs it. "Jesus, baby girl. You're stronger than you look."

"Shut up and drive. I want some alcohol before more alcohol."

"Baby girl, you complete me."

Tommy's is a bust, though, despite the Hanson boy's promises of "good booze." Billy's over it within the first five minutes, and I bite my tongue to keep myself from saying a big old "I told you so." Instead I drink my cheap beer and stroke up and down Billy's exposed torso, laughing with him at how bad Mike, Drew, Kyle, and Matt are at beer pong. Even Carol looks a little peeved, and she shoots me a bored shrug. I laugh, able to deal with these assholes better once I've got a few beers in me, no matter how cheap they are.

Finally it's 7:30, the perfect time to head to Tina's. I hug the host and thank her when she immediately figures out who I am.

"I'm surprised Billy didn't just go as the Terminator."

I laugh. "Yeah. In all seriousness though, if he makes you guess who he is, he's Sodapop Curtis."

"Mmm. He is easy on the eyes. Sorry girl." I roll my eyes and hip check her.

"It's fine. You can window shop. Just no touching the merchandise." She giggles and urges me towards the action.

"Veronica, keg stand time! C'mon, let's see if your boy-toy can beat King Steve!" Carol cheers, tipsy enough to grab my hand without hesitation and pull me outside.

"Came to wish me luck?" Billy asks as soon as I'm deposited in front of him, Carol giggling into her Cobra Kai dressed boyfriend.

"You don't need luck, California." I smile widely and kiss him, gentler than before. "Don't forget to keep swallowing."

He snorts. "Usually that's your job."

I laugh and shove him. "Go, do your thing." He winks at me and nods at Matt and Tommy, who left him up by his legs. Mötley Crüe's "Shout at the Devil" blares all around us, and I cheer with the rest of the crowd as my boyfriend keeps chugging from the nozzle. I finally feel a little normal without also feeling like I'm pretending, so I just cheer louder as Vicki and Tina cling to me.



"38!39!40!41!42!" We all count up, and Billy comes up for air, proud grin on his face as he sprays the extra beer out of his mouth, some of it dripping down his sweaty torso. It's not gross, though, like I thought it'd be.

"Yeah!" He roars over the crowd, and Tommy passes my boyfriend a lit cigarette.

"42! We've got ourselves a new Keg King!" He announces.

"That's how you do it Hawkins! That's how you do it!" Billy shouts. "Where's my girl?!"

I laugh at how excited he is running into his arms and jumping up so my legs are wrapped around his, the sweat and beer on his body all over my shirt. The crowd keeps cheering as we make out, and he carries me into the party with Kyle and Tommy behind him, setting me down when we hit the back entrance.

"I'm gonna go get some punch!" I yell over the music.

"Don't be long!" Billy yells back. I laugh, and with very little effort navigate myself through the thick crowd on the dance floor, dunking my solo cup in the red liquid - "pure fuel!" one kid bellows, drinking heavily.

Just as I'm stepping around the counter to make my way to Billy, the front door open. Steve and Nancy enter, the former with his sunglasses on. I smile fondly at his outfit before remembering I'm still pissed at him. I'm not pissed at Nancy though, so I rush up to meet her at the door. She smiles and waves at me, but it fades a bit when Tommy, Kyle, and Billy get in Steve's face. Steve leans towards the door and rips his sunglasses off his face. Nancy rolls her eyes and walks over to me.

"You look great." She compliments me, but is a little tense. I nod in understanding.

"You, too. Go on, get a drink. But not too much, alright? Only a couple of cups. It's ridiculously strong."

She rolls her eyes but smiles, hugging me quickly. "Okay!" She shouts

over the noise.

"I'll handle the alpha showdown!" I tell her, and she pats my shoulder before walking away.

"We got ourselves a new Keg King, Harrington!" Tommy announces.

"Yeah!" Kyle shouts.

"Eat it, Harrington!" Matt finishes. I grin innocently and walk in between the four boys, greeting Steve.

"You made it! I thought you and Nance got lost!" I tease. He frowns at me a bit, then shrugs.

"You know Nance. She wanted to make sure she looked perfect."

I laugh. "Yeah. I guess that's true." I lean up and quickly kiss Billy, and his body loosens from its previously tense state.

"Oooh, you two gonna disappear on us in a bit? You gonna please your new King?" Tommy asks, and I glare at him.

"Why are you so concerned with my sex life, Hanson?" I shout at him. He takes a step back. "Did you piss off Carol and now she's not giving you any?" He throws up his hands and slinks away, presumably to go pay attention to his girlfriend.

"I love your fire, baby girl!" Billy practically moans, pulling me into a scorching kiss. We separate and I look back to see Steve glaring at my boyfriend, clearly pissed about something. A quick glance at Billy reveals his throwing back a challenging expression before whisking me onto the dance floor to grind his energy away.

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Three cups of punch in, and I'm only just buzzed. I cut myself off, just like Billy. Neither one of us wants to get in a wreck, after all. Not that we'd really be able to get drunk with the amount of sweat rolling over our bodies. Nancy had joined us in the beginning, moving with me while Billy held my waist, cheering us on when we decided to spin each other. But she left to go dance with Steve and be a "stupid teenager." So I just focused on Billy, occasionally dancing with Tina

and even Nicole, though she backed off when I caught her trying to grind on Billy.

I tied my bomber around my waist nearly an hour ago, but Billy's still moving around in his leather jacket. His lips trail down to my neck as we move our hips in sink. My nails rake down his abs, stroking just over the button of his jeans before coming back up. Both his hands are on my ass, groping. The sucking turns into biting, and I'm throwing my head back before going in for a few marks, too, laughing when he moans.

We break apart for a little air, and that's when the hair on the back of my neck rises and the lights start to flicker.

*Shit. Oh, hell.*

"Bi-Billy. I'm going to go outside. Get some air."

"You okay? You gonna be sick?" He asks me, whispering in my ears.

"I'm fine. Just need to breathe."

"Okay. I'll be here." He promises, and I feel his eyes on me as I rush out into the night, Tina's front lawn thankfully empty in reality, everyone either in the back or somewhere in the house.

The lights behind me keep flickering and I sit down on the hood of Billy's car, knowing he won't mind. I close my eyes for the briefest of moments, and when I reopen them I'm back in the Upside Down.

"This isn't real. This isn't real." I mutter to myself, and something growls in the distance and rises up, appendages growing and smoke-form filling up like a demented balloon.

The monster isn't looking at me, though. It's staring in the opposite direction. I cover my mouth to hide my screams, eyes filling with tears at just how big and imposing it is.

This is the evil Will was talking about. This was what's trying to kill everyone else. Am I part of "everyone else"? Am I just no one to it?

I bite my fist, hard, and the pain jolts me, sending shockwaves to my

brain. And I'm back where I belong, sitting on the vine-free hood of the Camaro.

Jesus, I didn't think I drank that much. But I must've, right? It's just the Anniversary Effect. It's only PTSD. Dr. Owens knows what he's talking about, right?

Right.

I slide off the hood of the car and walk back towards the house, only to stop in my tracks when I see a dejected Steve storming out, hands in his jacket pockets and face teary. "Steve? Steve, are you okay?" I ask, setting aside my anger to check on my best friend. He just storms past me, ignoring me. "Steve!" I shout, and he stops. "What happened?"

He scoffs and turns, his face morphing into what it used to look like, before the Demogorgon and Nancy. It's all "King Steve", angry and tense.

"What do you want Veronica? Huh? Jesus, just go back inside." He growls.

"Steve, what -"

I step back as he advances a bit, body shaking with rage but tears leaking from his eyes. "Go in and keep pretending you're okay!" He shouts at me.

I glare. "Pretending? I'm the only one who isn't!"

"Cut the bullshit! That's what this all is, right? It's bullshit! Nancy was real clear about that. That's right, she spilled the beans! We're all pretenders here! It's our fault Barb died, it's our fault you got taken!"

I shake my head. "Steve, no, that isn't true. It wasn't your fault. She's just drunk!"

"Again, that's bullshit! I know she meant every word, *princess*." he throws at me, calling me a name he hasn't in over a year.

"Jesus Christ, why are you getting mad at me! Whatever, talk to me

when you aren't being a dick!" I shout. Before I can turn, he throws up his arms.

"That's right! Go back inside and make out with your asshole boyfriend. Go act like we don't exist!"

"Hey, I'm not acting like you guys don't exist! You're the one who threw a fit about me dating someone! You're the one who went on the offensive!" I shout back. "He takes care of me. He *knows* me."

Steve laughs, harsh. "Please. 'I love your fire.?' " Steve scoffs. "You're all ice, princess. Cold, frozen, harsh with people who act exactly like he does!"

"Can't you see I'm not that anymore! I am fire. I'm all explosive rage!"

"No! You're acting like you are because that's how you're coping with shit. And it was fine for a month, but now you're pretending that *this* is *who you are*!" Steve yells.

"Shut up! Shut up!" I rush forward and hit at his chest, shoving him back. "You're the pretender! You're the one acting like nothing happened! You're so blinded by what you need to hold onto that you can't see I've changed! You don't see it, Nancy and Jonathan didn't see it until recently. You think this is a phase? This is who I am! I'm all fire now!" I scream, tears rolling down my cheek. "Billy sees that! He's the only one who does!"

"Really? You think he's the only one who sees you, who knows you? Even the smallest things?" Steve yells, towering over me, but I just rise up. "Does he know your favorite color? Does he know what your favorite favorite flower is? Does he know what you do before a big test? Does he know what kind of movies you like, and which ones you don't? Does he know what kind of dog you want? Does he know what your favorite song is - not your 'anthem', but the song that makes you feel happiest!"

"Not yet." I admit, realizing that even after our deep conversation, Billy and I haven't really talked. It's just all so new, and we have time. So I glare up at Steve. "But he will!"

Steve laughs again, just as harsh. "Fine. If you say so. But for the record, I know the answer to every single one of those questions, and more. Your favorite color is violet, but you say it's green so people don't think you're too girly, which is insane because no one would ever accuse you of being girly, ever, no matter what color you wear. You love gardenias, and you think roses are overrated. You love romantic comedies, but you say you don't. And you hate scary movies, even though you say you do. The thing you hate most is that the blonde girl always dies first, and she's always ditzzy or sexual and none of those things should dictate who deserves to die! You want a Bernese Mountain Dog, and you don't care about the gender or have a name picked out, because one will come to you when you meet it."

I blink up at him, and take a step back in surprise. "I... you only know all that because I told you!" I deflect.

"Well, what about this shit you never told me? I figured that out all by myself. That's right, I may not be able to write a damn college essay, but my eyes work just fine when it comes to you. You never told me your favorite song. I figured it out, all on my own. The song that makes you happiest - your favorite, you blast it whenever you're in the kitchen, getting our snacks ready for a movie - is 'Boogie Woogie Bugle Boy' by the Andrews Sisters. You know every single word, the harmony and the melody, all of it. Before every big test, you play with your fingers and mouth the words to 'Cherry Bomb' - your anthem - and it relaxes you enough that your whole body stops vibrating. For small, insignificant tests, you twirl your pencil around three times, probably because 3 is a lucky number. Your lucky number. When you're in deep thought, you bite your lip. When you're pissed off, your right eyebrow quivers, like a warning. When you're upset, you clench your fists so tight you break the skin of your palms. When you're confused your lips get even poutier, your nose crinkles, and you curse under your breath like a maniac!"

My eyes water as he talks, my heart ripping but my veins singing. "Stop -" I beg, tears sliding down my cheeks.

He just keeps going. "I could list 1000 more things I know about you without ever having to have asked you. So don't you dare say that asshole is the only one who sees you. Because I've always seen you!" I wipe away falling tears, but more slide down. "And don't think for

one second I haven't noticed you took off the ring!" He yells, pointing at my bare right thumb. "What happened to you 'never taking it off? Did Hargrove make you? Because the Veronica I know would never let someone control what she wears! She would never date a guy like that!"

"He isn't like that!" I scream. "I chose to take it off! Me! I needed a break from it!" I keep crying, both of us breathing hard. Steve has this heartbroken look in his eyes, but I take it as him thinking about what Nancy said.

The door opens behind me, a worried voice calling my name. Steve just scoffs. "There you are. Jesus, I thought you'd left!" Billy shouts. He turns me away from Steve, glaring heavily when he sees my wet face.

"Was he bothering you?" My boyfriend asks, voice dangerously low. "Baby girl?"

"No. No, he was just leaving."

Steve and I glare at each other before he scoffs again, turning around and walking down towards his car. I collapse into Billy, starting to sob. He only shushes me and strokes my hair. "Are you sure you don't want me handle it?"

Despite everything, the hallucination and the fight, I laugh, wiping away my tears. "No, no. It's fine. We've been fighting for a few days now. We've been overdue for a big argument. No hurting my best friend, or I'll be dumping your ass." I poke at his bare chest.

He pouts. "Not even a light punch for making you cry?"

I shake my head. "I hurt him, too. We'll talk it over tomorrow, though. He's just... going through a lot."

"Yeah, so are you, but you aren't acting like a raging bitch." He comments.

I smile up at him in thanks, but all I hear is me screaming at Steve after he had a big fight with Nancy.

"It'll blow over tomorrow, California. C'mon, your adoring fans are waiting to worship their new King." I curtsy to him, and he laughs, kissing my lips and wiping under my eyes to fix my makeup.

"Only if Queen V joins me."

I smile and kiss his sternum before looking up. "As Your Highness requests."

He snorts and steps away, pulling me back towards Tina's house. I look back, just once, and see Steve climbing into his car, driving away.

The party's only gotten more alive, the music louder and more alcohol set out. Billy gives my hand a squeeze to go grab us both something to drink, and a cold hand drops on my shoulder. I turn, about to go on the offensive, when I see it's just Nancy, her sweater covered in red punch. And behind her stands...

"Jonathan?" I ask. "You came! Jesus, where were you hiding?" He laughs and pulls me into a hug, but frown a bit when he sees my face.

"Are you okay? Did Billy -"

"No, no." I shake my head. "Steve and I got into an argument. He's gone."

Jonathan nods, glancing down at a bopping Nancy warily. She's drunk off her ass, definitely surpassing the two-cups minimum rule I set for her. "Yeah. He saw me when he was coming downstairs and asked me to take her home."

"T-talk. To. To y-you!" Nancy tells me, and Jonathan and I steady her.

"So much for drinking responsibly." I mutter, but it goes unheard by her.

"Told St-steve the truth. We're bullshit. *We-were* bull. Shit. I'm sorry." She pouts at me, tearing up. "H-hurt you. Lied. Pretended. We were bullshit, but you two aren't!"

"Me and Billy?" I ask, but she shakes her head.



"N-no."

"Me and Jonathan?"

"No!" She yelps at me, arms waving a bit wildly. "I'm sorry. Kept pretending, kept hurting you." She stumbles again, and Jonathan catches her.

"I should -"

"Yeah. Do you want me to come with?" I offer, but he shakes his head.

"No, it's okay. Go be a normal teenager for once. Have fun with your boyfriend." He nudges his head and I turn to see Billy approaching, carrying a solo cup in each hand. I turn back around to say goodbye, but they've practically vanished in thin air.

"You okay?" Billy asks me, holding out my cup. I nod and take a sip from it, swallowing down the hallucination, Steve, and Nancy.

"Yeah. Dance with me, California." He grins and tugs me into the middle of the dance floor, helping me lose myself in the rhythm.

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*3rd Person (Steve's POV)...*

He slams his hands against his steering wheel, parked in his empty driveway in front of his empty house. Nancy's words run through his head, over and over. "Bullshit. Bullshit. Bullshit. Like we're in love. It's bullshit." He whispers to himself.

He thinks of the almost-year he's spent with Nancy. All that time spent falling for a girl who would never truly fall for him. They're both bullshit, it's true. They picked an easy relationship over ones that meant more. They chose each other rather than the person they truly *need*. He's still hurt, more than a little broken from Nancy's words. He never expected her to blame them both for Barb's death and almost losing Veronica. He did grow to love Nancy, it's true. But he spent all that time pretending it was more than he loved the girl he'd been pining over since middle school. Yeah, that's right, since *goddamn middle school*, only decided to pull her proverbial pigtailed

and spent years being a jackass to her, so really, it's no wonder why she'd never actually love him, no matter how much he wished she did. He pretended that his love for Nancy surpassed the love he's felt for Veronica for nearly three years. And he got himself hurt, and then he hurt Veronica, and she hurt him back.

It's killing him, it really is, that she's with a guy like Hargrove. Steve may not be the King of Hawkins High anymore, but people still like him. He hears things. He knows Billy Hargrove's a dick to the same people Veronica has defended. And yet she took his ring off, because she needed a break from *Steve*. And now *Hargrove* gets to *kiss* her, *hold* her, learn to *love* her.

Steve Harrington is smart enough to know he isn't just losing the girl he's in love with. He's losing his best friend, the person who matters most to him in this messed up world. All because he couldn't be brave. There's this pain in his gut, and all he can think is, "*She almost died. Twice. But losing her like this feels so much worse.*"

## 12. The Pollywog

Hi all, and welcome to my *Stranger Things* Steve Harrington/OC story! It's been a long, long time coming. Seriously. Since 2017 long.

In this story, we've got the Ice Queen of Hawkins, the older-but-shorter-by-season 2 sister of Dustin Henderson, because he deserves an older sibling. She's Veronica, and even though *Heathers* came out in 1989 I've taken the liberty of borrowing some of my favorite quotes because *Winona Ryder Easter Eggs*. Seriously, I cannot overstate my love for that movie. Anyway, there's more of a backstory for the Henderson family, including adding the dad to the "asshole fathers club", co-president with Lonnie Byers, the prick. Expect explicit language because, hello, *Stranger Things* isn't known for censoring language.

Fair warning, while this is a Steve/OC fic, the season 2 part will include Billy/OC, but not for long. I promise. He's a great character, but he's a dick until he isn't. Just wanted to get that out of the way. Because again, he's a dick. And don't worry, his ST2 behavior does not go unchecked by Veronica, so there won't be any sweeping his choices under the rug. However, I'm also treating their relationship a bit like Jackson Whittemore and Lydia Martin's from *Teen Wolf*, especially with the later outcome. And there will also be inbetween chapters between ST1 and ST2, then ST2 and ST3, adding some more things as well as a deeper dive into how Max and Billy's relationship changes, because let's be honest that wasn't really commented on in ST3, and I'd like to see it. But this will not be a Billy Hargrove/OC endgame story. Not like that. Also, I'm so glad you guys are liking how I'm writing Billy. It was important for me to show you the potential of who he could be if he stopped following in his dad's footsteps. Also, their relationship allows for us to see another side of Billy that wasn't touched on. Just be patient with everything! While this relationship isn't "endgame", it will still be important to both characters. Also, don't take her lingering feelings for Steve as her using Billy to get over him. While initially she thought of him as a fun little distraction, the first

date had her hooked. Just remember she's been in love with Steve for a few years now, and that's not something you get over in 15 days. Just want to clarify that - the relationship problems that will transpire between Billy and Veronica (again, they aren't endgame, but i will be writing an AU Billy/OC fic soon) are not about her feelings for Steve. It'd be a disservice to Billy and Veronica to make it all shallow rather than direct consequences to Billy's actions in the second season. Again, it's actions over feelings that dictate the outcome of their relationship. Also, just because this is a Steve/OC fic it does not mean I'll be letting his behavior towards Veronica in the next few chapters - and her with him - go unchecked. These are teenagers who are not perfect, and no relationship is perfect. Just something to keep in mind in case either one of them piss you off. But they learn from their mistakes, and they learn how to grow up while coping with their trauma healthily, which wasn't what happened for them between the events of ST1 and ST2.

Phew, this took me a longer time to actually sit down and write than I thought, mainly because I'm figuring out what in the world's going on with Veronica. I did it, though, so yay me! This chapter follows 2x03, and ends on a cliffhanger. The next chapter will pick up from exactly where I left off. This is honestly more of a "filler canon chapter" than anything else, but has Steve and Veronica talking, a big scene between Veronica, Jonathan, and Nancy, and most importantly Will and Veronica talk about what they've seen. Of course there is some cute Bill/Veronica stuff, but we're starting to veer away from the romance sub-plot and into what goes down in ST2. Also, we see Veronica back at the shooting range, because I miss archery moments. Also, I want to clarify that she doesn't completely forgive Steve in this chapter. Yes, they have a nice talk and they're still best friends, but it all isn't water under the bridge. More of that will come later, though, so don't think I'm just going to breeze past it!

Enjoy the story! I only own Veronica.

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My alarm blares in my ear and I roll over to slam my hand down on the button, moaning when I see how early it is. I groan as I sit up in bed, head throbbing just a touch and my whole body tingling with anxiety. I'd felt it a bit last night, after Billy dropped me off. The minute I walked into my quiet house - it was 2 in the morning by then - I had this urge to run.

I didn't, though. Instead I pulled out Jonathan's old hunting knife and slept with it under my pillow. I was distracted enough by my own intoxication to not question the feeling as lingering stress from my hallucination, but now I think it's something else. Something's here that shouldn't be. Or maybe it's all in my head.

With slow, careful movements I get ready for the day, even more on edge now that I've remembered it's November 1st. In seven days, it will be the one year anniversary of Barb's death my abduction. I just want to crawl back into my bed and stay there. I want to run and hide, just like I did in the Upside Down.

But I can't. So I don't.

Instead I brush my teeth, get dressed, brush my hair, put on a little makeup. I tuck my keys into the pocket of Billy's leather jacket and pull on my boots. But before I leave my room, I reach under my bed and grab my duffle bag, slinging it over my shoulder.

My mom patters away in the kitchen, a pot of coffee brewed as she whisks batter for pancakes. "Oh, sweetheart, good morning. You're up early." She notes, setting down the bowl to walk around the kitchen table and pull me into a hug. I return the gesture, still feeling a little empty inside.

"Morning, mom." I whisper, then move to pour myself a cup of coffee, hands shaking the whole time.

"You going to range today?" My mom asks, and I feel her eyes on my back. I only nod. "Was it a bad night?"

"No. No. The party was a lot of fun."

"Are you and that Billy boy -"

"We're fine. He's good. Really good." I look over my shoulder at her to send her a reassuring smile before pouring some cream into my mug. "I just... feel a little off today."

"Of course." She says, and I turn around fully to look at her as she nods, walking over to hug me once more. "Oh, dumpling, I know it's going to be a difficult month."

"Yeah." Is all I can say in response, letting her hug me close.

"If you need to stay home today, or leave early -"

"I'm sure I'll be okay. I just need to go through the motions, you know? Follow my same routine."

"You shouldn't ignore how you're feeling though, Veronica. We all almost lost you. I just want you safe and taking care of yourself."

I nod, tearing up. "I know. I know, mom. I'm sorry."

"Oh, sweetheart, no. No, you don't have to be sorry. Nothing that happened was your fault, do you understand me? You're my little fighter, and you came home to us. That's all that matters in the end."

I step back from her and nod, both of us silently crying. I spend so much time thinking about what I almost lost, sometimes I forget that my family almost lost me, too. Well, I don't forget necessarily. It's more like... like I don't prioritize it enough. "I'm sorry. I'm so sorry you almost lost me."

"Hey. Hey, none of that, sweetheart. I'll admit, there are days where I wake up afraid you're gone. And sometimes I just want to wrap you up and lock you inside or follow you around town."

"Mom -"

"But I never have to be scared for very long. I always remember you made it home. Or I'll go and check your room, and you'll be getting what little sleep you can. It's only natural, Veronica. This isn't to make you feel guilty. I'm trying to tell you that you're not alone in your fear. So if you need to take the day off, all you have to do is let me know and I'll get you out of school."

"Thank you." I whisper, but my hands are still shaking as I take a gulp of hot coffee.

"What else happened?"

"What do you mean?" I ask, smacking my lips together.

My mom just gives me a look. "I'm your mother, dumpling. I think I can tell when something's bothering you. It isn't just that it's November, is it?"

I sigh and shake my head, setting down my mug. "No. No, it isn't. I... me and Steve, we got into an argument."

"About Billy?" She guesses, taking a seat at the kitchen table. I nod and follow her, dropping my duffle on the ground.

"Among other things. He and Nancy got into a fight, and I tried to comfort him. It backfired, though."

"I'm sorry. Have you been arguing recently?" I raise an eyebrow and she points at my right thumb. "You aren't wearing the ring anymore. I think I know better than most what that means." She reaches out her hand to squeeze my left, and I squeeze her limb back.

"I took it off because I... I got tired of looking at it and realizing I'd never get to be with him. It was time to let him go." I finally admit, and she nods at me.

"Well, sweetheart, I'm going to share a secret that I've learned in my old age." I snort at her dramatics - she's barely 41. "Sometimes, the people we let go have a way of surprising us?"

"How?" I whisper, wiping away tears.

She gives me a sad smile, her brown eyes boring into my soul. "They come back. And occasionally... we learn that there was never a reason to give them up. Because they never left." My mom pats my hand then stands up. "I'm going to get breakfast started for Dusty. Do you want some pancakes or do you just want to take some fruit for the road?"

I shake my head and stand, one hand on my duffle and the other reaching for an apple. "No, I'm just going to head to school. I have someone I need to talk to."

"Okay. You'll call me, though? If you want to leave early?"

"I promise I will." I smile at her and kiss her cheek before walking away. "Tell Dustin I said good morning, okay?"

"Of course, sweetheart. I love you!"

"I love you, too!" I call back, closing my front door and making a b-line to my car, hoping behind the wheel of the *Millenium Falcon* and tossing my duffle in the backseat. My apple in my mouth I start the engine and peel out, driving towards the Hawkins Middle School.

It's time to talk to Will.

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I sit on the hood of my car, fingers twitching against each other to a random beat. Kids hop out of cars all around me, parents waving and yelling after them. I haven't seen my brother yet, but he may have just gone through another entrance. Max waved to me earlier when she skated past, a small smile on her freckled face. Mike and Lucas came a few minutes after she did, both giving me confused hugs but nonetheless happy to see me.

*"We're planning on having a campaign on Saturday. Do you want to join? I can work something out." Mike had said. I only shrugged and said,*

*"Maybe. I might be hanging out with a friend, but if anything I can stop by the house and watch?"*

*Mike's face fell a little at that, the same with Lucas. The latter merely sighed. "Fine. But you'll join the next week?"*

*"Oh, hell yes. You guys need your huntress." I shooed them towards the school, knowing they'd both find a way to distract themselves from getting to class.*

A red car pulls in front of me, horn beeping friendly. Will gets out, with Bob poking his head out to wave hello to me. "Good morning,



Veronica!"

I wave back to Joyce's boyfriend and grin. "Morning, Bob!" I hop off my hood and walk over to Will, pulling the slightly smaller boy into a hug. "I need to talk to our young William Byers, here. Do you mind watching my car for a few minutes? I'll walk him to the building and everything." I promise, smiling sweetly.

Bob nods and gets out, as happy as ever. He really is a good guy. Jonathan thinks he's a total dork, but I know my best friend likes seeing his mom happy. "Okay, sure. As long as Will gets inside safe."

I nod back. "Of course." I keep one arm wrapped around Will's shoulders and we slowly walk down the path towards the school. "So, how was the car ride with Bob The Brain?" Will gives me a confused look. "Hopper."

"I think you need a new father figure, Huntress." Will jokes, but his voice is quiet. I smirk, then match his volume.

"Yeah, well, point me in the direction of another male adult who actually cares about me, and I'll gladly ask them if they're interested in taking care of a traumatized girl." I give him a joking grin, though, so Will's tense shoulders relax. "Yeah, yeah. I know. And Hopper may have his faults, but he's the best man for the job when it comes to acting like a dad, you know?"

"Yeah. I know."

Jim Hopper hasn't missed one of our appointments at Hawkins Lab.

Even when my dad and I were talking, he only called once every three months.

"So, what did you want to talk to me about?" Will asks as we're halfway to the school, passing by the bike racks.

I look down at him a bit, eyebrow raised. "I think you know."

"The hallucinations."

"If we're both having them, I'm not so sure they're hallucinations

anymore." I comment, looking around carefully. "What do you see?"

"Tuesday night, I just woke up, randomly. I, uh, heard thunder. Saw red lightning. I opened my door, and suddenly I was back. I saw it, Veronica. I saw the shadow monster. And it looked straight at me." He snuffles and I nod, pulling him in closer so we can sit on the steps of the middle school. "And then, yesterday, when we were Trick-or-Treating, it happened again. Only there wasn't any thunder or lightning. But the monster was back, and it kept growing and growing, so I ran. I didn't stop until Mike pulled me out. It was like I was there, in the Upside Down, but also here." Will looks up at me, big brown eyes shining with unshed tears. "What did you see, Veronica?" He whispers.

I bite my lip, green eyes wide with fear. "The same things. But, from the back. It's like I said at our appointment, this thing doesn't seem to see me. But now I think it's more than that - I think it just doesn't want to. Like I'm not on it's radar. I don't know why, I wish I did."

"Maybe... maybe it's because of how we were found?" Will poses, and I tilt my head.

"What do you mean?"

"When mom and Hopper found me, I had a vine down my throat." I nod. "But you didn't. Nothing got into you."

"Yes, it did." He bites his lip. "Not the vine, but, last year, Dr. Owens told me my DNA was changed. Your's wasn't though. Right?"

Will shakes his head. "No, no it wasn't. But we both breathed the same air."

"Yeah."

"What if... what if whatever made it so your DNA changed chose you. There's got to be a reason why, just like there has to be a reason why the Demogorgon chose to stalk me." Will says, voice strong despite his dewy eyes.

"Will, we're talking about another dimension. I'm not so sure things can be answered rationally."

"But isn't it worth looking into? This has to be more than just trauma, right? And you've had more episodes than me, I know you have. Which means whatever is happening to me is different than what's happening to you."

I sigh and run my hand through my hair, nervously pulling it up into a high, messy ponytail. "I just... this is such bullshit, right? Sorry." I mutter, and he snorts.

"Please. Dustin curses more than you. I'm not an innocent kid, either."

"Well, sorry if I want you to be. At least a little bit." I kiss the top of his head. And sit in silence for a few moments.

"Hey, Veronica?"

"Yeah, Will?" I ask, and he turns to look at me.

"You said before, 'Once is happenstance. Twice is coincidence. Three times is enemy action.'"

"Yeah?"

"What's a fourth time?" He asks me, and I look over his shoulder, off into space.

"I have absolutely no idea." I shake myself out of it and stand up, helping Will up, too. "But let me worry about that, okay? Get to class."

"Aye, aye, captain." He salutes me, and with one last tight hug walks up into the building. I sigh and turn towards my car, waving at Bob.

"Thank you so much. Sorry if I kept you -"

"Hey, no, it's fine. Don't worry about it. You doing alright?" Bob asks me, and I smile.

"Yeah. Better now. Um, I have to get to class. Have a nice day, tell Joyce I said 'hi'."

"Of course, yeah. Have a good day at school, kiddo." He waves

friendly at me and gets in his car, driving off carefully. I get behind my wheel and make a sharp u-turn, driving down to the lot towards the high school and parking in my usual spot.

When I get out, I see few stragglers rushing into the building, but I can't find it in myself to hurry after them. So what if I'm a few minutes late for class? So I slowly walk towards the school, Billy's jacket wrapped around me.

"Veronica?" I stop just in front of the door and turn around, nice and easy.

Steve stands behind me, hands in the back pockets of his jeans and hair messier than usual. I doubt most people would notice, but I'm not most people. Not when it comes to Steven Harrington.

"What is it?" I ask, crossing my arms over my chest.

"I just. I wanted to." He groans and runs his hands through his hair. I bite my lip, patient. More patient than I've been in awhile, actually. "I wanted to apologize. I'm sorry. I never should have exploded like that. Especially not to you."

"It's ok-"

"No, it isn't. It really isn't. I wasn't mad at you, and I never should have used you as my verbal punching bag. You didn't deserve that."

"I'm sorry, too."

Steve gives me an incredulous look, shaking his head. "Why the hell are you sorry? I was being a dick. You were trying to help me out, and I blew up in your face like a psycho. It was - God, I've been trying not to be the same douchebag I've been most of high school. Especially when it comes to you."

I sigh and kick at the cement under me. "Yeah, well, I was being a bitch."

"Only because I hurt you."

I nod, then bite my lip again. "I'm sorry." He looks like he's about to

argue. "For not telling you about Billy. Any of you. I should have. We're not supposed to keep secrets from each other."

He nods, giving me a sad look and cautiously walking closer. "Yeah. It's okay though, Roni. I get it. So, are we still friends? You can be mad at me for however long you want, but are we still friends?" He repeats.

"No." He starts to frown. "We're best friends."

He snorts in disbelief and pulls me in close. "You suck, Henderson."

"Bite me, Harrington." He laughs and we separate, and I pat his shoulder. "Are you doing okay? After -"

"I'm fine." I narrow my eyes at his poor attempt at lying. "Alright, I'm not fine. But I'm not some bitch. I'm not going to go hide away because Nancy Wheeler called me bullshit." I just nod, his words burning like a pyre. "Jesus, sorry. I'm not mad at you."

"Steve -"

"Look. I'm happy you have someone. Especially going into this month." My throat clenches up. "I'm glad there's another person to help you through everything. But if I'm being honest... there's something about Hargrove that rubs me the wrong way."

"What do you mean?"

He shakes his head. "Like, I can't explain it. I just, I don't trust him." I look at him, confused. "I have to go, or I'll be late for English. But if you need me, you can come get me. Alright? I just want you safe."

"If I need you, I'll find you." I promise.

Steve nods, then pulls me into one more hug. "Just take today one step at a time, Roni. You aren't alone, okay?"

I nod into his chest and he lets me go, entering the school. I frown as I watch his back. His words are still playing in my head, on a cycle. They haven't stopped playing. And no, I don't forgive him just yet. He knows I don't forgive him. But I refuse to lose anymore friends this

November.

So with one last deep breath, I enter the school, walking towards Billy as he leans against a locker, Tommy and Carol talking animatedly to him.

"Hey, baby girl." He greets, pulling me into a distracting kiss. I smile, the butterflies fluttering in my stomach.

"Hi." I whisper back, letting him kiss me again. "Walk me to my locker?" I lace our hands together, and he kisses my palm.

"It'd be my honor." He straightens, about to walk with me, but Tommy stops us and we turn in our tracks.

"Hey, Veronica?" I raise an eyebrow.

Since when am I "Veronica" to either one of them?

"Yeah, Tommy?" I respond, burying my confusion.

"I just wanted to say... uh..." He looks to Carol, who rolls her eyes affectionately.

"What Tommy is trying to say is, we know today sucks for you. That this whole month probably will. So what do you say to a truce, until the last day of November?"

I smile at them, a real smile, and nod. "Deal."

Billy whisks me away, impatient. The halls part for us and he wraps his arm around my shoulders, dropping my hand in order to do so. "You and Harrington speak yet?"

"Mhmm. We apologized. Well, he mainly did."

"And you forgave him?" Billy asks, voice even.

I shrug. "He's my best friend."

"So you forgave him? Just like that?"

"No. I didn't forgive him. But I've got other shit to think about right

now." I bite at Billy, who grins.

"There's that fire, baby girl. Shoulda used it on Harrington. Do you want me to? Or we can tag team. I know you've been itching for a fight. I see it every time you ball up your hands into little, strong fists." He encourages me, lifting up one of my hands with his free one to nip at my fingers. "I bet you look hot, throwing a punch."

I snort, turning a bit so we can stop in front of my locker, Nancy nowhere to be seen. I open the door and press a few fingers to the photo of her, Barb, and me, smiling sadly at my late friend. "Yeah, well, I'm not going to punch Steve. I may hit Drew though. He's a dick."

"Mmm. Tell me when you're gonna do it, and I'll make sure to grab some popcorn. Maybe I'll join in, if you get tired." I laugh, but it turns into a small moan when he comes up behind me and tugs my jacket off, back to him as he nibbles at my neck.

"Dammit Billy, cut it out." I mutter. He laughs and steps away, turning me to face him so my back is shoved against my empty locker.

"What? Am I not distracting you enough?"

"Distracting me?" I ask, pulling my head back to give him a look.

He sighs. "Yeah. I figured it wouldn't be the greatest day for you. Or the best month. So I'm gonna distract you the best way I know how."

"Kisses and sex?"

"Absolutely." He leans back in and kisses me, and I laugh into his lips, but inside I'm a raging storm.

Billy said, *"There's that fire, baby girl. Shoulda used it on Harrington. Do you want me to? Or we can tag team. I know you've been itching for a fight."*

Steve said, *"You're all ice, princess. Cold, frozen, harsh with people who act exactly like he does!"*

I told Billy, *"But I've got other shit to think about right now."* He just laughed and let me bite at him.

But Steve... Steve would've made me talk about it. He wouldn't just distract me from my problems. He'd make me face them. He'd let me be angry, but he'd want me to be healthy about it. And he never would have encouraged me to throw a punch, not unless the person absolutely deserved it.

*"You're acting like you are because that's how you're coping with shit. And it was fine for a month, but now you're pretending that this is who you are!"* Steve had yelled at me.

What if he was right? What if the person I've become is just a mask? Armor molded from anger?

But what if it's not a bad thing? What if who I've become is who I was always going to be?

For now, I'll let Billy keep kissing me, even as the first bell rings and students swarm around us, rushing off to class. I'll let myself be distracted by my boyfriend, because it's my turn to be happy for once.

---

I breathe fresh air as I step outside the building not even three hours into the school day, stomach turning at the thought of eating. The cafeteria is too loud, and while it's nice being with Billy, I'm just... I'm too on edge right now. It's like I'm coming down from a bad high, or like my medication is finally failing me.

In the distance, I can see Jonathan sitting on the hood of his car, talking with Nancy. I roll my shoulders back and march up to them, just as Nancy is asking, "So, he asked you to take me home?" I slow down a bit, realizing what they're discussing.

"Yeah." Jonathan confirms. "Yeah, he was upset. I mean, he was... he was really upset. But he was still worried about you. Hey. You need to cut yourself some slack, okay?"

"His right." I announce, walking so I'm in their line of sight. They give



me soft looks as I approach, leaning next to Nancy. "We all said shit last night."

"What happened with you? Did you and Billy -"

"No, no. Billy and I are fine. Me and Steve got into it, though. Actually, it was more like Steve got into it with me."

"Oh. Oh, I'm sorry." She whispers.

I shrug. "It's whatever. Friends fight all the time. But, uh, do you remember anything you said last night?"

She shakes her head. "No. Why? Did I call you 'bullshit' too?"

I smirk. "No, nothing like you. Drunk you doesn't have the balls to say that to me." Nancy rolls her eyes, but my smile drops down into a serious look. "You said 'We were bullshit, but you two aren't!' And I guess I just wanted to know who you were talking about."

Nancy gets this look in her eyes, but she shakes her head once more. "No, I'm sorry. How are you doing, though?"

"Not good." I admit, voice cracking a bit. "I just feel... on edge. Like something very bad is about to happen."

"Hey, Ver, you're safe. We've got you." Jonathan promises, and I walk over to let him pull me into a brotherly hug. "Nancy, are you still thinking about last night? Because people say stupid shit when they're wasted. Things they don't mean. I once told Veronica she wasn't my sister." He tells her, and I punch his shoulder at the memory.

That was not a fun night. He did buy me strawberry milkshakes for two weeks, though.

"Yeah, but that's the thing. What if I did mean it?" I turn around to look at her, Jonathan's arms wrapped around my neck. "All this time, I've been trying so hard to pretend like everything's fine, but it's not." I step out of Jonathan's hold and push back their cans of pop, sitting between the two and letting Nancy hold my hand. "I... I feel like there's this... I don't know, like this..."

"Like there's this weight you're carrying around with you." Jonathan finishes for her, then looks directly into Nancy's blue eyes. "All the time."

"Yeah, but it's different for you. Will came home. Veronica came home." I tilt my head at Nancy, seeing where she's going.

"Yeah. Yeah, they did. But they're not the same." Jonathan looks at me. "You're not the same, and you know it." He argues, but I only hold up my hands in surrender.

"Hey, I wasn't about to say any different."

Jonathan gives me a small smile. "Yeah, okay." He looks up at Nancy again. "Things can't go back to the way they were, no matter how hard we try."

"Doesn't that make you mad? Because I'm furious. I'm always angry." She admits, looking at me. "You're angry, too, right? We know you are. At those... those people, for ruining our lives!" She passionately declares, and I nod.

"You know I am."

"And the people responsible for everything just keep getting away with it!"

Jonathan leans forward, staring at us gently. "The people responsible are dead."

"Do you really believe that?" Nancy asks, voice barely a whisper. I nod with her, then watch in confusion as she focuses on a random classmate listening to his walkman. "Your mom's boyfriend." She mumbles, then looks over me at Jonathan. "He works at RadioShack, right?"

"Yeah. Why? What are you thinking?"

Nancy just looks at me, nodding. "I'm in. No more sitting on the sidelines."

I smile. "So you're in?"

"I never should have even hesitated."

"Hello? What are you two talking about?" Jonathan asks.

"Barb. Hawkins Lab. Exposing them. Are you in?" Nancy asks.

Jonathan balks, blinking at me. "Was this -"

"My idea? Yeah. There's only so much I can do to help the Hollands. I'm done letting them suffer. My patience has worn thin."

Jonathan looks at me, nods, then looks to Nancy. "I'm in. For Barb. And Veronica."

"Excellent. Do you feel like skipping fourth period?" Nancy asks. Before Jonathan can respond I grin and get off the hood of his car.

"Yes. Absolutely."

"No." Nancy shakes her head. I open my mouth in protest. "No."

"Hey, this was my idea first!" I argue, pointing at her, but she gently smacks my finger away.

"Yeah, well, you're on edge. You said so yourself. The last thing we need it you losing it during an investigation."

"Oh, ye of little faith." I growl, but Jonathan shakes his head at me. "Seriously?"

"Nancy's right, Rockstar." He tells me. "You've done more than you needed to. Let us handle it, now."

"Guys, come on!" I shout. "I owe this to Barb. I failed her, and I can't keep failing her parents!"

Nancy shakes her head, getting off the hood of the car and grabbing my shoulders, pulling me close to her. "Listen to me, Vera. You did not fail Barb. You have not failed her parents. You need to focus on taking care of yourself. I'm the one who failed. And I owe it to you and Barb to take these assholes down."

Before I can respond, Jonathan puts in his two cents. "You're my sister, Ver. I'm tired of not doing anything. Let us handle this. Like I said, you've done more than enough already. I need you to get better, to be healthy and stress-free. That can't happen if you're focusing on this."

I bite my lip, guilt gnawing at my stomach. "But -"

Nancy pulls me into a hug. "Please, let us do this."

Sighing, I nod into her shoulder. "Fine. Okay. But... be careful. And if you need backup -"

"We'll call you, Robin Hood."

"Actually I was going to say 'Call Hopper' but that works, too." Jonathan laughs as Nancy releases me, and they walk towards the passenger and driver doors.

"Take care of yourself, okay?" Jonathan asks, and I nod.

"You guys, too." They smile and close their doors almost in perfect sync, and I back away as Jonathan's engine sputters on, watching the dynamic duo drive off.

I'm still on edge though. Talking about Barb wouldn't have changed that. It's only made it worse. So I think about what my mom said, and I make my way to the phone outside the school, waving at a few passing classmates. My wave is more enthusiastic when I see Robin perched on a bench, talking with a few friends in band, Keith loitering behind them with a hand shoved into his bag of Cheetos Puffs.

I cross over to the phone and slide in the change in my back pocket, at the ready since first period. It only rings a few times before my mom picks up. With a simple, "hi" on my end, she makes a small, wounded noise.

"Oh, sweetheart. I'll call the school. Do you need me to meet you at the range?"

"No. I'll be fine. I'm sure Craig is in. I'll call... or he'll call, you

know...." if it gets worse goes unsaid.

"Okay. Be safe. I love you, dumpling."

"I love you too." I hang up a second after the line goes dead, then sigh into my hands. Before anyone can pay too much attention to my inevitable meltdown I rush into the school, lunch still in session as I make my way to the overcrowded cafeteria.

It's easy to find Billy. He's sitting at the center table, his rapidly-growing followers surrounding him. A few girls lean in too close, but when they see me approaching immediately back off.

Not that I actually care. I know Billy likes me more than them.

I wave at him a few tables away, and that cocky grin he wears around the others morphs into a genuine smile. It fades a bit, though, when he stands and walks towards me. Just as he's opening his mouth, I shake my head and point towards the hallway. He nods and follows me out, arm wrapped tightly around my waist.

Once we get to my locker, I lean back against it and let him box me in, blocking anyone else from getting a peek at me. "Baby girl?"

"I'm going to the range." I whisper, looking up at him. "I-I thought I was okay, but I can't be here right now. I... I see her around every corner, walking towards me or talking to someone in one of her overachieving academic clubs. I need to leave."

"Okay. Hey, it's okay." He tells me, leaning in to press his lips onto mine. It becomes heated fairly quickly, and when we break apart I'm panting a bit. "You called your mom?"

"Yeah. I just wanted you to know that I'm leaving early. Didn't want you to think I was just blowing you off."

"Baby girl, I'm too amazing to be blown off."

"You're amazing to blow." I tease a bit, but our laughter is stilted. "Can you... do you want to take me to school tomorrow?"

"Queen V, it'd be my absolute pleasure. You'll have to deal with

Maxine, though."

I snort. "Please. Your sister likes me."

"Stepsister." He corrects, growling at me. I take the challenge, poking him in the chest.

"Notice how the word 'sister' is still included?"

His eyes narrow, his right eyebrow quirks, and his lips form a smug smirk. "There's my girl. All ready to explode." He nods, and smiles as though nothing had happened. "Get to the range safe, okay? And if you need me, call. My old man's out of town for a few days with the wife, so we don't have to worry about him being a raging dick."

It throws me off a bit, his shift in tone. Then again I was already thrown off by my emotions, so I choose to let it go. "Alright." I nod, then kiss his lips again. "Hey, do you want your jacket back?" I ask, opening my locker once he's stepped back enough.

"If you don't mind. Not that you don't look goddamn delectable in it." He adds, and I laugh, passing it back and pulling on the blue and white windbreaker I'd been meaning to take home. I grab my bag and sling it over one shoulder. "Do you want me to get your homework for you?" He asks, and I smile up at him after locking up.

"No, it's okay. I'll grab it tomorrow. But thanks, California." I lean up on the balls of my feet to kiss his jaw. With one last peck on my lips he lets me go, his eyes on my back my whole way out the door.

---

I narrow my eyes at the target, shooting the arrow seconds after the previous one. Then again, and again, moving from target to target, Craig having set up a private exterior range for me. He's sitting inside, watching through the window no doubt as I draw, aim, loose, over and over again. My hands are numb, my arms ache, but all that pain keeps my mind from unraveling. Every target is the Demogorgon's open face. It's Dr. Brenner and his scientist friends. It's the shadow monster haunting my dreams.

I pant and throw down my bow, wiping the sweat from my brow on

the back of my hand and watching a couple drops of red liquid fall from my palm. My calluses are definitely ripped open, and I wince at the sting as I pull my practice arrows out of the targets, every single shot in this past round a bullseye.

I've been going at this for three hours, now, with only a few bathroom and water breaks. The cool air makes me shiver a bit now that I've stopped shooting.

I refuse to look down at my hands. Instead I walk back to my bow and pick it up, arrows back in my hip-quiver as I get ready to repeat.

*One.* The Demogorgon attacking Barb and I in the pool, dragging her away. *Two.* The strange dogs hunting me in the Upside Down. *Three.* The vines reaching for me, trying to strangle the life out of me. *Four.* Dr. Brenner trying to take me away. *Five.* The Demogorgon attacking the Byers home, crawling out of the ceiling and opening its flower head. *Six.* The Demogorgon on top of Jonathan. *Seven.* The Demogorgon throwing me into the wall. *Eight.* I'm weak and helpless. *Nine.* The hallways of the middle school are littered with blood and dead bodies. *Ten.* El is disappearing, taking the Demogorgon with her

-

"Veronica!" I instantly lower my bow and turn around, hand still on the arrow in my quiver. Craig is walking towards me, shaking his head and holding up a First Aid kit. "That's enough for today."

"Oh, come on. I'm on a roll." I tell him, smirking. He only shakes his head, though.

"Your hands are torn up and we need to fix it. I've given you three hours - uninterrupted - to deal with your emotions. Now it's time to patch you up."

I look up at him and nod, letting my instructor lead me over to a couple of chairs. I hold out my hands and barely wince as he wipes away the blood with rubbing alcohol, used to the pain after years and years of archery-related wounds.

I watch patiently as he rubs Neosporin on the ripped skin and carefully wraps them. "You have more gauze at home, right?" Craig

asks me, and I nod. "Your mom is going to kill me, by the way, for letting your hands get so messed up."

I snort. "I won't let her. There's no one else here who can teach me archery."

"Well, I hate to admit it, but I'm not so sure you need me to instruct you anymore." I look up from my hands and into his kind brown eyes. "You're damn-near professional at this point. Have you ever considered doing competitions?"

"It's just a hobby." I tell him, staring over at my weapon of choice. "A hobby I excel at. I don't do it to win awards, though. I do it for myself."

He shrugs. "Hey, I'm not about to tell you what to do with your life, Veronica. Only that you should take it easy on the target practice. Even though you probably won't."

Laughing, I ignore the twinge in my hand as I pat his shoulder. "You know me so well, teach."

He rolls his eyes and pushes my shoulder in a friendly manner. "Yeah, yeah. Get your stuff and move it, or I'm banning you."

I gasp, mock offended. "You wouldn't dare!"

"Get!" He orders. I bow but do as he says, shouting a goodbye over my shoulder as I sling my packed duffle onto my back and leave the range. I toss it carefully into the backseat of my car before getting into the driver's seat, groaning as I grip the wheel. My hands are pulsing a bit, but I don't feel completely on edge like before.

With a sigh I'm carefully pulling into the road, driving down Main St so I can get home and sleep off the rest of my funk. Maybe I can even convince Dustin to fork over some more Halloween candy. Nothing quite knocks you out like crashing from a sugar rush.

I make a turn, the streets empty as usual. I don't like how close I am to the woods, so I sit up more in my seat and grip the steering wheel.

But it isn't until I make a turn onto Cornwallis that I realize I'm not



even driving in the right direction. In fact, I don't even know where my mind was trying to take me, only that something is very, very wrong. I'm nowhere near the schools, which I should be by now since I have to pass them to get home from Downtown. In fact, I'm closer to Mirkwood than I am -

Oh shit.

The back of my neck erupts into goosebumps, the hair standing up despite the sweat licking it down. With a yank on my wheel I'm pulling over and stopping my car, the keys clenched in my hand as I throw myself out of the *Millenium Falcon*, slamming the door behind me as I crash down onto my knees in the rush to escape.

And in that time, the world turned dark blue and vines crept all around me, covering my car and the road and the trees. Big white flakes rain down from the sky, evaporating out of existence the minute they touch my skin. Just like in my room, the vines aren't attacking me. They're too busy withering around this upside down world to care.

I stare down at the pavement in front of me, knees singing in pain. I should get off the road, but I can't. This is it. The fourth time.

A large, black shadow begins to grow over me, and I cover my mouth to hide my screams. My eyes widen when it starts to move away from me, and unable to help it I carefully turn so I'm kneeling in the opposite direction.

The shadow monster looms larger than ever before, scarier than any possible nuclear attack. I stagger to stand, but still stay rooted in place. I can only watch as it's limbs stretch out.

*Will. I need to find Will. I need to save Will.*

Ignoring the ache in my knees, I stumble in the direction of the monster, only for the vines to finally notice me. I scream and yell as the crawl up me, never getting past my knees. I topple down onto all fours, the vines wrapping around my wrist, holding me down but never once reaching up for my throat.

The monster before me turns, and I feel it's stare on me. It sees me, and my heart clenches in fear. I'm powerless as one of the monsters limbs turns into a black tornado, shooting towards me.

I can't help it. I scream, and wait for the storm to take me.

### 13. Will the Wise

Hi all, and welcome to my *Stranger Things* Steve Harrington/OC story! It's been a long, long time coming. Seriously. Since 2017 long.

In this story, we've got the Ice Queen of Hawkins, the older-but-shorter-by-season 2 sister of Dustin Henderson, because he deserves an older sibling. She's Veronica, and even though *Heathers* came out in 1989 I've taken the liberty of borrowing some of my favorite quotes because *Winona Ryder Easter Eggs*. Seriously, I cannot overstate my love for that movie. Anyway, there's more of a backstory for the Henderson family, including adding the dad to the "asshole fathers club", co-president with Lonnie Byers, the prick. Expect explicit language because, hello, *Stranger Things* isn't known for censoring language.

Fair warning, while this is a Steve/OC fic, the season 2 part will include Billy/OC, but not for long. I promise. He's a great character, but he's a dick until he isn't. Just wanted to get that out of the way. Because again, he's a dick. And don't worry, his ST2 behavior does not go unchecked by Veronica, so there won't be any sweeping his choices under the rug. However, I'm also treating their relationship a bit like Jackson Whittemore and Lydia Martin's from *Teen Wolf*, especially with the later outcome. And there will also be inbetween chapters between ST1 and ST2, then ST2 and ST3, adding some more things as well as a deeper dive into how Max and Billy's relationship changes, because let's be honest that wasn't really commented on in ST3, and I'd like to see it. But this will not be a Billy Hargrove/OC endgame story. Not like that. Also, I'm so glad you guys are liking how I'm writing Billy. It was important for me to show you the potential of who he could be if he stopped following in his dad's footsteps. Also, their relationship allows for us to see another side of Billy that wasn't touched on. Just be patient with everything! While this relationship isn't "endgame", it will still be important to both characters. Also, don't take her lingering feelings for Steve as her using Billy to get over him. While initially she thought of him as a fun little distraction, the first

date had her hooked. Just remember she's been in love with Steve for a few years now, and that's not something you get over in 15 days. Just want to clarify that - the relationship problems that will transpire between Billy and Veronica (again, they aren't endgame, but i will be writing an AU Billy/OC fic soon) are not about her feelings for Steve. It'd be a disservice to Billy and Veronica to make it all shallow rather than direct consequences to Billy's actions in the second season. Again, it's actions over feelings that dictate the outcome of their relationship. Also, just because this is a Steve/OC fic it does not mean I'll be letting his behavior towards Veronica in the next few chapters - and her with him - go unchecked. These are teenagers who are not perfect, and no relationship is perfect. Just something to keep in mind in case either one of them piss you off. But they learn from their mistakes, and they learn how to grow up while coping with their trauma healthily, which wasn't what happened for them between the events of ST1 and ST2.

Once again, it took awhile to actually sit down and right this chapter. We follow right after we left off. We've got a Will/Veronica/Joyce scene, some Henderson family stuff, Billy/Veronica moments with Max sprinkled in, and another scene from Steve's POV! I'm sure you can all guess the infamous 2x04 scene I'll be writing about. We get more Billy-being-a-dick stuff, and Veronica makes a decision to push her fear aside to figure out what's going on. The next chapter will be a little bit more focused on Veronica on her own, but I'm gearing up for 2x06 and onwards. This is a shorter chapter, but again it picks up more by 2x06. I just needed to get this up so I could move on.

Enjoy the story! I only own Veronica.

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*The monster before me turns, and I feel it's stare on me. It sees me, and my heart clenches in fear. I'm powerless as one of the monsters limbs turns into a black tornado, shooting towards me.*

*I can't help it. I scream, and wait for the storm to take me.*

Black smoke surrounds me, blocking anything I might be able to see.

But it doesn't actually attack me. Not in the way I thought it would. It's more of a power move than anything else, a warning for me to fall in line. To bow down to an alpha. I mean, physically I already am thanks to the vines. I wish I was able to spit on the tornado, tell the monster it has no power over me. But that would be a lie.

The wind it creates howls in my ears, the smoke twisting around me like I'm in the eye of the storm. I clench my bound wrists and bite my lip to hold in my screams, not wanting to give the shadow monster the satisfaction of knowing I'm the most scared I've been in awhile.

Then, as quick as it came, it's gone. The whole monster is gone, taking its smoke and storm with it.

But the Upside Down isn't. I'm still on all fours. The vines are still holding me in place, though they're starting to slither away. I stare down at my bruised wrists, knees singing in pain and gauze-wrapped palms darkened in certain spots. I stand up, slowly, and look around. In confusion. I shouldn't be here. There isn't another demogorgon around to create a tear. I wasn't pulled through goo. I just blinked and I was here. Stuck in my own damn head.

I grunt in annoyance and limp towards my car, attempting to open it. I can't, though, because there are vines wrapped around it like a boa constrictor, wrapped so tight I can't even break my windows.

"The hell do you want from me?" I growl, tugging on the vines. They don't budge. "Seriously? Haven't you little shits messed up my life enough?" I tug again. Nothing.

I walk around my car, closer to the vine-covered woods. I watch - mind blank - as the tendrils snake away from each other, creating a path in the woods.

The same woods I haven't entered in a year. Well, same and different.

I turn back to my car, hoping the vines have moved so I can get back in. I pinch my arm so I can wake up from whatever I'm seeing. But my car is still wrapped up and I haven't left the Upside Down.

With a heavy sigh, I turn back to the path, the thick white particles

falling around me like snow. "I'm so royally screwed." I mutter, then with dread in my stomach begin my journey down the road less traveled.

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It's strange, being back here. In the woods, be it the Upside Down or my normal world. Sure, I would go on hikes at Camp Know Where, but the forest there was different. It lacked the history I have with this place. Plus, I had a bunch of kids to distract me from any potential panic attacks.

The vines move every few minutes, guiding me the right way. Their right way. Whenever I try to turn back or move in another direction, the vines block my way, rooting me in place as they do.

It takes me ten minutes to figure out where I'm going. It's someplace I'd always considered safe. Well, up until the Demogorgon climbed down from the ceiling. So five minutes later, I'm walking out of the woods towards the vine-covered Byers house, looking even more run-down than in normal Hawkins. I carefully walk up the steps to stand on the porch, vines on the ground parting for me like the students at Hawkins High.

I reach my hand out to twist the knob when something rumbles behind me. "Veronica?!" Someone shouts, and I turn around, Upside Down gone. I'm back in Hawkins, staring down at a more-than-confused Joyce Byers and in-shock Will. I look around, lost. "Veronica, sweetie, what's wrong?" Joyce asks, walking up the steps with Will tucked into her side, shaking in fear.

"I-I-I..." I stammer out before rushing over to her, letting my best friend's mom pull me into her with one arm.

"Okay. Okay, let's go inside."

She lets go of me briefly to unlock the door to her house, but her arm returns to its spot around my waist as she ushers us inside to sit at the kitchen table. I sit on Will's other side, the two of us quickly holding the other's hand, anchoring each other just like our visit to Hawkins Lab on Tuesday. "Veronica, can you... can you tell me what happened?"

I blink and look around, still expecting to be in the Upside Down. "I-"

"What happened to your hands? And your knees? Your wrists - oh honey." She murmurs, reaching out to touch my free limb, and I wince. Looking down, I see the bruising, then the big holes on the knees of my jeans, bloodied and dirty. "I'll be right back. Let me get the First Aid kit." I nod at her words and hear her walk away.

"You saw it too." I comment, not even looking at Will.

He squeezes my hand. "Yes."

"Four times."

"Four times."

We go quiet again when Joyce returns, and she carefully twists my seat. I let go of Will's hand so my body isn't twisted in an uncomfortable position, and vaguely register the blood on said hand.

As Joyce unwraps the gauze and cleans my wounds I turn my head to look out the window. The sun shines through, but it does nothing to warm me.

"There." She finally murmurs, and I look down at my bandaged knees, then my hands. Gauze is wrapped from just below my wrist to the base of my fingers, white and a little thick. "Make sure you rewrap them after your shower, and in the morning. There will be no infections on my watch, okay dear?" She gives me that warm, motherly smile of hers and I nod, my lips twitching up a bit. Her eyes turn sad and wet, and she presses her lips to my forehead before standing up and returning my seat to its original position. As she walks around the table to sit in her chair, Will reaches over and carefully takes my hand once more, a little more gentle. I preferred the original roughness of it, though. The pain was my anchor. "Can you tell me what happened?" She asks us, and Will and I turn to each other.

We share a non-verbal conversation, our eyes and eyebrows conveying our messages. With a sigh I look back at her.

"I was driving home from the range. It's why my hands were already

bloody. I was there for three hours -"

"Oh, Veronica." She sighs.

"I. I needed an outlet. It was either archery, or someone's face. Um, I was driving. Then I realized I wasn't even going the right way home. It was like a magnet was pulling me in another direction. I felt this chill at the back of my neck. Goosebumps. It's a warning, for an episode. So I pulled over, next to Mirkwood. As soon as I got out of my car, I was in the Upside Down. This... this Shadow Monster was there. The one I saw Monday. But it wasn't close. *Close-close* I mean. But it was so big that distance didn't matter. The vines, they... they tugged me onto the ground. Bound my wrists so I couldn't get up. The monster turned my way, and it became this-this *tornado*. It swirled around me. I thought it was going to come in me, but it didn't. It was gone in the blink of an eye, but I was still in the Upside Down. I thought I was going to be stuck there, again." I wipe away some tears before they can fall, sniffing. "The vines let me go, but then they lead me through Mirkwood. So I followed them - I tried to go a different way, but the vines kept stopping me. I ended up here. When you called my name, you snapped me back. Or brought me back. I'm not even sure." Joyce nods and leans forward, taking my free hand. "I was so scared, Joyce." I admit.

"Oh, Veronica. *Sweetheart*." She takes my free hand, making no further comments but still comforting me through a motherly touch. After a few seconds she turns to the still-silent Will. "What about you? What did you see?" She asks patiently, worried.

"I can't remember." He mutters, but I know it's a lie. I'm not about to say that out loud, though.

Joyce sighs. "I need you to try."

Will looks at me again, and I nod in support, squeezing his hand. "I... I was on the field and... and then it... it all just went blank, and... and then you were there." Still not the truth, buddy.

Joyce sees the lie, too. "I need you to tell me the truth." She gently prods.



"I'm here, Will." I promise him.

"I am!" Will argues. I breathe in through my nose. He looks at me as Joyce briefly walks away, smoke from her cigarette trailing after her. My hands itch to grab one, so I wiggle my free fingers instead. She returns fairly quickly, setting down a piece of white paper. There - drawn with a blue crayon - is a sketch of the shadow monster.

"This shape, I saw it on the video tape from Halloween night. It's the same shape as... as your drawing. Veronica, is this what you saw?" She gives me a gentle look and I nod, mouth moving wordlessly. She nods. "These episodes you're both having, I think Dr. Owens is wrong. I think they're real. But... but I can't help you if I don't know what's going on." She directs towards her son, who looks away in fear. "So you have to talk to me. Please. No more secrets, okay?" He nods. "Okay." She whispers back, voice shaking. "Did... did you see this thing again on the field?"

"Yes." He mutters, barely making eye-contact with his mom.

"The Shadow Monster? Is that what it is?"

"I don't know." He tearfully responds. "I guess? But it's almost more like a feeling. T-to me." He stammers.

"Like the one you had that night at the arcade?" Joyce asks.

He looks off into space, briefly, before nodding and looking at her. "Yes."

"Do... do either of you know what it wants?" She asks us.

"N-not me. I know it *doesn't* want me." I tell her, looking directly into her chocolate-brown eyes. "It's terrifying, though."

"It came for me." Joyce and I turn to Will, his eyes wet. "And... and I tried. T-tried to make it go away. But it got me mom!" He cries out, Joyce nodding behind the hand covering her mouth.

"Well, what does that mean?" She asks, removing her hand from her mouth.

"I felt it... everywhere. Everywhere. Like... like Veronica. But... but I still feel it. Inside me. I just want this to be over!" He cries out, detaching his hand from mine so he can wrap his arms around his mother.

"It's okay. It's okay. Hey." She tries to comfort him, sending me a look to match her voice. She pulls back a bit and cups her son's face as he sniffles. "Listen. Look, look at me. I will never, ever let anything bad happen to you ever again. Either one of you." She smiles at me. "Whatever's going on in you, we're gonna fix it. I will fix it." Joyce promises. "I promise. I'm here." She holds her son closer and I nod, standing up.

"Where are you going?" Joyce asks, giving me a concerned look.

"I, uh. I left my car at Cornwallis."

"You shouldn't be going -"

"Joyce, this thing isn't after me. It had the perfect opportunity to hurt me, but it didn't." She shakes her head.

"Okay. Alright. But the minute something happens, you come here, okay? Or you call Hop."

"Alright." Vaguely, I wonder if I should suggest telling Jonathan what happened, but then I realize I don't actually know where he is. Where he or Nancy are. What they're in the middle of.

*God, was it only a few hours ago that they decided to go on their "Exposition Mission"?*

"Sweetheart, if you're thinking about Jonathan... I'll tell him about Will, okay? It'll be better, coming from us. You know how he can get." I nod at her words. "But you should tell him about yours. He should know. Does he know about the others."

I shake my head. "No. No, the only people who know are you, Will, Hop, Dustin, and Nancy."

"Why haven't you -"

"I didn't want to scare him. Don't him to worry more. And I thought... I really hoped it was just PTSD. Not this shit."

Joyce snorts and nods, her smile sad. "Okay. Okay, dear. The minute it gets worse though -"

"I'll call. Promise. Um, I'll stop by tomorrow. After school. Maybe we can all explain it to Jonathan."

"That's fine. Of course. Please, get home safe. Call me when you get there, okay?"

"Okay." I promise, then wrap her in a hug. "Thank you."

With that I'm walking away, no less heavier than I was before.

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I didn't sleep. At all. I couldn't. I mean, nothing went wrong when I went to go get my car. It was still there. I drove home without another episode. My mom fussed over my wounds, but when I explained - in way less detail - what had happened she simply gave me a few kisses around my face and made me promise to be more careful. Dustin was quieter than usual, but shakily explained to me as we were getting ready for bed that he'd seen Will, when he was having his episode.

So, because I do this now, I lie and say nothing happened to me. He believes, or maybe he wants to believe it.

As soon as the sun begins to rise, I slip out of bed, decision made after hours of staring up at the ceiling. I grab my camping bag from the back of my closet and pack what I'll need, toiletries and a roll of toilet paper included. I can spend the night at the Byers house, and the next I'll stay in Castle Byers, so I only pack up my thicker sleeping bag. Double-checking I have my survival kit I zip everything up, throwing it on my bed. Next, I open my duffle and remove my practice arrows, compiling my hunting ones instead and tossing in my small whetstone. I toss in Jonathan's old hunting knife for good measure.

I change into my baggy jeans and a long sleeved black shirt. With a

heavy sigh I pull on my old hunting jacket - my dad's old one, so it dwarfs me. I slip on my hunting boots and quietly take care of business in the bathroom, grabbing my toothbrush on the way out.

It isn't until I'm marching down the hall that I remember Billy's picking me up, which means no *Millenium Falcon*.

*Shit.*

Okay, alright. So, I can ask my mom to just drop off my stuff on the porch of the Byers house. I've done it enough times that Joyce won't say anything. In fact, she knows me so well, she'll probably figure out my plan as soon as she sees my gear.

"What's all this?" My mom asks, my brother quickly chowing down on his eggs and bacon.

"Twiwhp?" He asks, mouth bulging. I'm so used to it I don't even flinch.

"I decided to go camping. Tonight through Sunday, and I'll be back that night. Is that okay?"

My mom doesn't say anything. She simply drops the pan in the sink and rushes over to me, pulling me into a crushing hug. I hug her back, more than a little confused. When we separate, she wipes away unshed tears. "I'm just so happy! You... you're going camping!"

I nod, then think it over. Oh. It's been over a year. Oh. "Yeah. I just... I'm tired of being afraid." Is the answer I finally settle on. She nods, all proud. "But, um, could you maybe drop these off at the Byers house? Just on the porch?"

"Aren't you driving?" She questions, but Dustin swallows his food and responds before I can.

"She's probably going to school with her boyfriend!"

My mom raises an eyebrow, and I run my hand through my messy curls. "Yeah. I am. But his car's pretty small, so there's no room for my stuff." I give her a pleading look, and she sighs.

"Oh, fine. Of course. Do you want some food, or -"

Before she can finish, the doorbell rings. I point at it. "Billy. I think."

"Okay. Here, for the road!" She tosses me an apple and I easily catch it, reshouldering my backpack. Pocketing my house keys, kissing my mom's cheek, and ruffling my brother's hair I sluggishly walk towards the front door and open it.

Billy's leaning against the wall, and he stands taller when he sees me. "What's with the look, Rambo?" He questions. I tiredly snort.

"I'm camping. After school."

"Without me?" He asks as I close the door behind me and let him throw his arm around me.

"Have you even been camping before, California?" I question as we walk to the Camaro.

"No. But I'm sure it's easy... and we'll be all alone in the woods. You'll keep me safe, right?" He purrs, and I snort again.

"Cool it, bad boy."

"And what the fuck happened to your hands?" He growls out. I shrug.

"I was a little too focused at the range. I'm okay, promise." I kiss his cheek, and he dimples at me.

"Alright. Where's all your stuff, then?" He asks as he opens the passenger door.

"My mom's driving it to Jonathan's house. There's a lot, so." I shrug. "And why are you so early?"

"We lost something that belongs to Mr. Clarke." Max answers, and I jump a bit in my seat. "And I promised the boys I'd help find it. Where's your brother?"

"Getting ready. He's biking. I'm sure he'll be there." I promise the redhead, who only huffs and sits back in her seat.

"Hey, shithead, don't be a bitch to my girl." Billy warns. I roll my eyes

and slap his shoulder.

"Jesus, Billy. She wasn't being a bitch. And I don't need you defending me from a 13-year-old girl." He huffs, all offended, until I lean forward and tug the collar of his jean jacket. Our lips meet, a struggle for dominance. I let him win, knowing he needs his ego stroked a bit. We part. "You heard Max. She's got shit to do. Step on it, Hargrove."

"Don't tell me what to do." He still starts the engine, though, and I turn my head to send a wink to Max. She gives me a small smile before frowning once more, glaring out the window.

I try not to doze off in the car, pinching my leg every now and then. "Baby girl, did you even sleep last night?" Billy asks, all quiet.

"Nope." Is my simple answer. He doesn't question further, just moves one hand onto my thigh to squeeze it.

When we get to the school I'm shooting out of the car, moving the seat up so Max can get out. With a fist-bump she's riding towards school, and I close the car door.

Billy walks around to stand behind me, turning me so my back is propped up against the passenger side. "Baby girl, are you sure you're okay?"

"Mmhmm. I'll take a nap during break. And maybe during math - you know that shit puts me to sleep." Billy snorts and nods, pressing his lips to my neck. When he straightens though, he has a cruelly-twisted smile. I turn my head to follow his gaze, and see a dejected Steve sitting on the hood of his Beemer, the most alone he's been in a year. I want to go over and talk to him, hold him, reassure him.

But that's not my place. Even with Nancy and him being over - I'm sure they're over - I'm not who he needs.

*I have Billy, though, and we want each other. Which means more. Right?*

"That's just depressing." My boyfriend mutters, and my mind flashes back to a year before, when Steve had said the same thing about Jonathan as my best friend was hanging up missing fliers. "He's

gonna be like that during practice. It's not fun winning if the competition sucks."

I nod. "Should I -"

"No. He was a dick to you, Cherie Currie." Billy tells me, finger hooked under my chin so I look up at him. "You said you didn't forgive him. He doesn't deserve your care, not after the shit he pulled. Okay? Harrington's a big boy, he can take care of himself."

I nod. "Yeah, you're right. Walk me to my locker?"

"Always." Billy winks at me, pulling me into a deep kiss before dragging me towards the school. As we pass Steve, he puts his hand on my ass, and for the first time in our relationship a blizzard forms in my stomach. But then, as if apologizing, Billy removes his hand and kisses my forehead, the lightest kiss he's given me yet.

I let it go, far too tired to make a fuss. There are worse things on my mind than possessive boyfriends.

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*3rd Person POV (Steve)...*

Steve stepped under the warm spray, washing off the *bullshit* of the day. He managed to ignore Nancy, knowing her schedule so well he could dodge her usual routes. He had to watch his best friend get whisked into the school by her possessive jackass of a boyfriend, her hands all bandaged. Then, that same asshole wiped the floor with him at practice.

Seriously, Hargrove's a dick. And Steve has no idea what Veronica sees in him, because she deserves better than some mullet-wearing asshole.

"Plant your feet. Draw a charge." *Bitch.*

Steve raises his head under the spray, washing away his sweat. The shower next to him turns on, and he groans when his companion speaks, sniffing a bit first. "Don't sweat it, Harrington. Today's just not your day, man."

Another shower turns on, Tommy joining in. Steve rolls his eyes a bit, Billy shutting off his shower in the meantime and starting to towel off. "Yeah. Not your week." Steve lathers on some soap, wishing he'd just gone home and washed off. He still doesn't know how he managed to be friends with Tommy for so long. "You and the princess break up for one day, and she's already running off with the freak's brother." Steve stops rubbing soap on himself, eyebrows furrowed a bit as he looks at Tommy. His ex-best friend looks too smug, his freckled face begging to be punched out. "Oh, shit. You don't know. Jonathan and the princess skipped yesterday. Still haven't shown. I mean, our Ice Queen left early too, but she's got class. Ain't that right, Hargrove?"

Steve chances a quick look at his best friend's boyfriend, who looks just as smug as Tommy. "What can I say? My girl's got standards."

*Clearly not. She's dating you.*

"But princess and Byers, that must just be a coincidence, right?" Tommy leans an arm against the shower post. He laughs, loud and obnoxious, before shutting off his water and strutting across the room to his towel.

With a sigh Steve runs shampoo through his thick hair, wishing it was Veronica running her hands through his locks. That he was with her.

"Don't take it too hard, man. A pretty boy like you has got nothing to worry about. Plenty of bitches in the sea." Billy steps closer and turns off Steve's shower, nice and slow. Steve tilts his head back to avoid shampoo getting in his eyes, then turns his head to stare down at the - thankfully - shorter male. "Am I right?" Billy asks, all smug. Tommy and the other boys walk off to go change. "I'm sure someone will leave you some." Hargrove steps even closer, flaring his nostrils a bit and voice low and burning. "But not Veronica. She's mine. That just kills you, right? Huh, Harrington? That I'm the one who gets to touch her. *Feel her*. Take care of her. She's never going to be yours. See, you spent so much time trying with Wheeler that you let the *real prize* slip away. And I *won* her. She's *mine*."

Steve's stomach flares with anger, a monster inside him trying to claw



its way out. "Veronica's not a prize, Hargrove. She's not someone you win. *And she's not someone you own.*" He warns.

Hargrove only snorts and steps back, giving Steve more space. "Maybe not. But she still chose me. Me, over the great King Steve. You have a nice weekend." With a slap on Steve's shoulder Billy struts away.

Steve watches him go, and with a smack to the handle of the shower tries to wash away his burning rage.

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*Veronica's POV...*

While not happy about the fact I'd be camping from today until Sunday (*"It's Friday, baby girl!"*/*"Well, I'll be back by 7. Pick me up at 9?"*/*"Alright. 9 on the dot."*) Billy left me for his car, hair still wet after his shower post-basketball practice.

I simply shoulder my backpack and walk up to the school, waiting by the bikes. I'm small enough one of these twerps will take me with them, and hopefully one is going to visit Will.

I'm not waiting too long. Mike comes up to me, worry all over his face. "What happened to you?"

"Long story." I mutter. "You going to Will's?"

"Why would I be -"

"He wasn't going to school today. Not after the episode he had." I explain.

Will stares at me, mouth open. "How did you know about that?"

"Because I've been having episodes, too."

"You have 'True Sight', too?" Mike asks, leaning forward to whisper it. I shrug.

"Sure. Whatever that means."

"It means you can see through the ethereal plane. See both the Upside Down and the normal world." I suck in a breath. "So you do have it?"

"Yeah. I do."

He nods at my confirmation, then pulls his bike out of the rack and slide forward. "Hop on, then, Huntress. I guess we've got some shit to take care of."

I laugh at his language but climb on behind him, letting the taller but younger boy carefully bike us to the Byers house.

We ride in silence, not even saying a word to each other when we get off the bike and walk up the steps of the porch. I smile when I see my gear next to the front door. "You're going into the woods?" Mike carefully asks me.

I nod up at him. "Yeah. It's time for me to be the Huntress again."

Mike just nods, then begins to pound on the door. "Hello?" He shouts. "Will! Mrs. Byers?"

The door unlocks, Joyce peering around the slightly-open door. She sees me, briefly, giving me a slight nod before focusing on Mike.

"Oh, you gave Veronica a ride? That's so sweet. Should I call your mom and tell her you're -"

"Is Will here?" He interrupts.

Joyce steps outside, closing the door behind her just a bit. "No-now is not really a good time."

"Is he okay?"

"Yeah, you know, he's just not feeling real well. He's laying down. So I'll let him you stopped by, okay?"

"Joyce." I cut in, leaning on the wall next to the door. "Let him stay."

"What? I -"

"It's about the shadow monster, isn't it?" Mike asks, and Joyce turns to look at him, confusion and shock written all over her face.

She turns to me and I nod. "Come in. Both of you."

With a heavy sigh I wrap my arm around Mike's shoulders, happy Will isn't going to be without one of his best friends. Not when he needs him the most.

## 14. Dig Dug

Hi all, and welcome to my *Stranger Things* Steve Harrington/OC story! It's been a long, long time coming. Seriously. Since 2017 long.

In this story, we've got the Ice Queen of Hawkins, the older-but-shorter-by-season 2 sister of Dustin Henderson, because he deserves an older sibling. She's Veronica, and even though *Heathers* came out in 1989 I've taken the liberty of borrowing some of my favorite quotes because *Winona Ryder Easter Eggs*. Seriously, I cannot overstate my love for that movie. Anyway, there's more of a backstory for the Henderson family, including adding the dad to the "asshole fathers club", co-president with Lonnie Byers, the prick. Expect explicit language because, hello, *Stranger Things* isn't known for censoring language.

Fair warning, while this is a Steve/OC fic, the season 2 part will include Billy/OC, but not for long. I promise. He's a great character, but he's a dick until he isn't. Just wanted to get that out of the way. Because again, he's a dick. And don't worry, his ST2 behavior does not go unchecked by Veronica, so there won't be any sweeping his choices under the rug. However, I'm also treating their relationship a bit like Jackson Whittemore and Lydia Martin's from *Teen Wolf*, especially with the later outcome. And there will also be inbetween chapters between ST1 and ST2, then ST2 and ST3, adding some more things as well as a deeper dive into how Max and Billy's relationship changes, because let's be honest that wasn't really commented on in ST3, and I'd like to see it. But this will not be a Billy Hargrove/OC endgame story. Not like that. Also, I'm so glad you guys are liking how I'm writing Billy. It was important for me to show you the potential of who he could be if he stopped following in his dad's footsteps. Also, their relationship allows for us to see another side of Billy that wasn't touched on. Just be patient with everything! While this relationship isn't "endgame", it will still be important to both characters. Also, don't take her lingering feelings for Steve as her using Billy to get over him. While initially she thought of him as a fun little distraction, the first

date had her hooked. Just remember she's been in love with Steve for a few years now, and that's not something you get over in 15 days. Just want to clarify that - the relationship problems that will transpire between Billy and Veronica (again, they aren't endgame, but i will be writing an AU Billy/OC fic soon) are not about her feelings for Steve. It'd be a disservice to Billy and Veronica to make it all shallow rather than direct consequences to Billy's actions in the second season. Again, it's actions over feelings that dictate the outcome of their relationship. Also, just because this is a Steve/OC fic it does not mean I'll be letting his behavior towards Veronica in the next few chapters - and her with him - go unchecked. These are teenagers who are not perfect, and no relationship is perfect. Just something to keep in mind in case either one of them piss you off. But they learn from their mistakes, and they learn how to grow up while coping with their trauma healthily, which wasn't what happened for them between the events of ST1 and ST2.

Once again, it took awhile to actually sit down and right this chapter. We follow right where we left off, at the Byers House with Mike, Will, Joyce, and Veronica looking for Hopper. The first part is the four of them together, but Veronica goes out on her own to figure out her connection with the Upside Down. I like what I came up with, to be honest. She isn't all powerful or all-seeing or any of that, but she pieces together what's going on. All the final details of her "mutation" as she aptly refers to it as is smoothed over by Dustin and later a no-longer-posessed Will. We do get to see her gain back some control over her trauma here, which is the most important thing, but that theme of "taking back control" really happens in the next chapter. I've already started on it, and I can already tell it's going to be super fun to write. In this chapter I also added a Steve POV, when he meets up with Dustin at the Wheeler House. He has his own flashback to 2x03, and I change up the conversation between him and Nancy to really tie everything together and finally put an end to the not-really love-quad. The love-triangle between Billy/Veronica/Steve is also winding down for obvious ST2 canonical reasons, but even then the next three chapters are focused more on the Party and fighting the Upside Down than

teen angst (barring the shit that goes down at the Byers House in 2x09). Anyway, there's more to come! Thanks for being so patient with me, I've had a weird week but I think I'm back on track.

Enjoy the story! I only own Veronica.

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I sit next to Will on his bed while Mike walks around the room analyzing the drawings taped to the walls. A frantic Joyce had explained that they were vines. The vines. My stomachs been twisting with dread non-stop, especially after she told us Hopper had gone out to investigate, not giving up a location in his rush.

I can't lose Hopper. I-I can't lose anyone, but I especially can't lose Hopper. Not after all he's done for me.

The whole house is covered in the crayon-etched vines, though, and it honestly makes me long for last year, when Joyce had put up strings of flickering Christmas lights instead. At least there was a festive element in all the horror and trauma.

I'm just kidding. I could barely handle seeing the lights on my tree this past Christmas.

Despite how sweaty Will is, I pull him into my arms and let him rest his head on my shoulder. I close my eyes when I hear Joyce slam down the phone before shuffling around the house some more, trying to piece together Will's pictures.

I'm sure Hopper's fine. Really. He's fine.

"What's it like?" Mike asks, taking a break from the pictures.

"It's like... it's like I feel what the shadow monster's feeling. See what he's seeing." Will answers, shaking in my arms.

"Like in the Upside Down?"

"Some of him is there." Will breathes out. "But some of him is here, too." The hair on the back of my neck is still standing up, on permanent danger mode.

Mike comes closer. "Here, like, in this house?"

"In this house and... in *me*." He whimpers a bit and I hold him closer, stroking his back. "It's like... it's like he's reaching into Hawkins more and more. And the more he spreads, the more connected I feel to him." Mike joins us on the bed, sitting next to Will.

"And the more you see these now-memories."

Now-memories: Seeing what the shadow monster can see, feeling what he can feel.

"At first I just felt it in the back of my head. I didn't even really know it was there. It's like, when you have a dream, and you can't remember it unless you think *really* hard. It was like that." Will straightens in my arms, pulling away a bit, and I let him. I stand up and walk around the bed to stare out the window. "But now it's like... Now I remember. I remember all the time."

"Maybe..." Mike speaks up, voice soft. "Maybe that's good."

I scoff, Will just as incredulous as me. "Good?" I hear him ask.

"Just think about it, Will. You're like a spy now. A superspy. Spying on the shadow monster. If you know what he's seeing and feeling... maybe that's how we can stop him. Maybe all of this is happening for a reason."

"You really think so?"

"Yeah, yeah I really do."

There's a few moments of silence, then, "What if he figures out we're spying on him?" Will snuffles. "What if he spies back?"

"He won't."

"How do you know?"

"We won't let him." Mike swears, and I close my eyes, forehead pressed against the glass and tears sliding down my cheeks. My shoulders shake and I cover my mouth to hide my crying. "Veronica?"

I suck in a deep breath and wipe away my tears, refusing to turn around. "Yeah?"

"Are you okay?" Mike asks.

I snort. "Yeah. I'm fine, kid."

"You still suck at lying." He lightly comments, and I snort, eyes still wet.

"Eh. I can lie about certain things. Kept my shit quiet for almost a year."

Will's bed creaks, and two pairs of footsteps walk over to me. I'm blocked in by the two boys, one taller and one shorter. I feel safe, despite the tingling in the back of my neck. "Do you see anything?" Will asks, still shaking. I wrap an arm around him to bring him back to me.

"Here of there?" I ask.

"Both."

I shake my head. "Nothing. I'm getting nothing."

"What's it like for you?" Mike asks, leaning on me a bit.

My fingers twitch, wishing they had a cigarette to keep them occupied. "Different. It's different. The one time the shadow monster saw me was yesterday. But it didn't... it didn't go in me. It swirled around me, like a damn tornado. Like it was trying to get me to submit. It's the damn vines, though. They're the ones that see me. The only things from the Upside Down that do. At first, I thought they were trying to attack me. But... but when they led me through the Upside Down to this house..." I trail off. "It's like they're guiding me."

"So why doesn't the shadow monster want you?"

"Because she's already connected to the Upside Down." Will answers for me, voice soft.

I nod. "Yeah. Last year, Dr. Owens told me my DNA had changed. We



didn't know what it meant. Well, I think I did, I just didn't want to admit it. There's this ash in the Upside Down. It just... it floats around. Kind of like really big flecks of peeled skin."

"Gross." Mike complains. I smile and look up at him a bit.

"Yeah. Only I spent four days getting a lung full of it."

"So did Will -"

"Yeah." I interrupt, nodding. "But Will and I... we think the ash *chose* me. That for some reason, it felt like it could... um..."

"Like you shared a bond?" Mike offers, and I nod.

"Sort of." I purse my lips. "But the bond for me, it's different. It's like I'm connected, but I'm also not?" Mike furrows his brows. "Like, I would hold my lighter to the vines and they'd shrink away, because I figured burning them would get rid of the little shits. It... it worked, and they'd shrink away and shriek. But I never felt anything. And I can't actually feel what the vines are feeling. Wouldn't I feel something if we were truly connected?"

Mike thinks, then nods to himself. "Maybe it's only a one-way bond? I mean, what if the Upside Down is only connected to *you* because it changed *your* DNA, but you didn't have the same biological impact on the Upside Down? Will made a physical connection because the vine was in him, so it got a sample of his DNA." He offers. I shrug.

"Sure. I mean, science was never my thing, and it's not like this shit comes with an owner's manual."

"Did you tell Dustin?" Mike asks. "About any of this? Your episodes, the vines?"

I bite my lip. "Not everything. Only what I knew, then. That it was just hallucinations. PTSD. The Anniversary Effect. No one knows about this, besides you two. Well, Joyce and Hopper know because of our appointments. And I told Nancy."

"But why didn't you -"

"I tried not to think too deeply about them. I wrote them off as... well, anything else. The truth can be hard to accept, sometimes." I caution, biting my lip and staring down at my bandaged hands. "You two should get ready for bed. It's getting late."

"Are you staying the night?" Will whispers. "Your mom dropped off your camping gear. Mom told me."

I release my lip and smile down at the kid who's practically a younger brother. "I'll stay. But tomorrow, I'm going into the woods." I look back out the window, still protected by the two middle schoolers. "It's time to be the Huntress again."

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*Hopper pants as he lies curled on the ground, smaller than I've ever seen him before. With every step I take towards him, the vines beneath me hold me in place. With what little light shines through, I realize we're in a tunnel.*

*I turn around when I hear footsteps behind me. It's Will, confused, but he just walks past me. It's like he never even saw me. The vines make a path for him, releasing me, and I call his name. He doesn't respond. Instead, he reaches out for the Chief of Police -*

I shoot up from my spot on the floor, body barely covered by my thick sleeping bag. My breathing is heavy, just like Will's. He shot up in bed the moment I did, just as panicked. "I saw him. I saw you. Did you see me?" I frantically ask him, gasping for air.

Will does the same, only he shakes his head. "Didn't see you. Saw him, though."

"Will, Veronica, what's going on?" Mike asks, sitting up in his own sleeping bag.

"Hopper. He's trapped." Will answers, throwing the covers off him and practically leaping over Mike to leave his room. We follow in a rush, and find Joyce sitting in the middle of the living room, legs crossed as she looks around the picture-covered room. "Mom. Mom? Mom." Will tries to get her attention, but she's zoned out. So he reaches forward and taps her shoulder. "Mom?"

She gasps and turns. "Yeah?"

"I saw him. I mean, we saw him. Me and Veronica." I wave at Joyce from behind Will, and she tilts her head.

"You saw who, baby?"

"Hopper." He answers.

"Joyce." The woman looks at me. "He's in trouble. Big trouble."

"I... I think he's gonna die." Will whispers to her, and my whole body sings with fear.

I try to push it aside, though. "Not if we find him first."

"Then that's what we're going to do." Joyce says, standing up strong though she's breathing shakily. "But we're gonna need a lot of coffee."

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As Will sits at his desk, hunched over and using crayons to harshly sketch out his "now-memories" I sit on his bed and take another sip from my coffee. Mike and Joyce hover over Will, and with every completed picture we rush around the house finishing the whacked-out puzzle.

Most of the time I've had my Walkman on, my eyes closed. I've been trying to get some "now-memories" too. Surprisingly, I want to be in the Upside Down. Especially if it means I can find Hopper. What I'm doing isn't enough. Not when it comes to him.

Will hands Joyce the next picture, and she walks into the hall with Mike on her heels. I stand, too, but only to go over to Will and place a supportive hand on my shoulder. He crosses his left arm over his chest to pat my right. "I need to go." I finally whisper.

He sucks in a breath, but nods. "I know."

"I don't want to."

"I *know*." He looks up at me with a small smile. "Veronica, it's okay."

I nod and wrap my free arm around him, hugging the youngest Byers from behind. "I have my walkie with me. But let's be honest, there's not much I can do here. I need to figure out this one-way bond. I need to know how to get to the Upside Down on my own terms."

"I get it. It's fine, Veronica. Really." I nod and press my forehead to the top of his hair. "But you'll contact us, if something happens? You won't go off completely on your own?"

His voice is too small - so small that it makes my heart clench. "Y-yeah. I will. I promise. Mind if I use Castle Byers?"

He shakes his head. "It's all yours."

"Okay." I kiss his temple and unwrap my arms, straightening up. He briefly turns in his chair to give me one last smile. "I'll see you soon, Will. Be smart. Stay safe."

He nods at those familiar words. "Promise."

With a small wave I walk out the room, taking my duffle and camping bag with me. I briefly stop in the bathroom to take care of business before washing my hands and leaving, bumping right into Mike. Joyce stands behind him, face twisted into a frown and arms crossed in fear.

"And just where do you think you're going?" She asks, in the same tone she uses whenever she catches Jonathan and I doing something stupid.

I blink and bite my lip, before relaxing my tense shoulders. "Out. To Castle Byers."

"You want to go out into the woods, *alone*? Is that what I'm hearing?" She questions harshly. I nod and stand my ground.

"Yes, I -"

"Absolutely not! I am not letting you go out there on your own. How do I know you aren't just going to try and find Hopper yourself?"

"You don't, Joyce. I'm just asking you to trust me. Do you trust me?"

She softens immediately, leaning down a bit to grasp my shoulders. "Of course I trust you. It's everything else that I don't. We can't lose you, too."

"You won't lose me Joyce. I just... I feel trapped here. I need to figure out how I access the 'now-memories'. I don't... I'm starting to think the vines aren't bringing me in. It's me. I'm finding ways to fall into the Upside Down, but I don't know how. I need to learn to control whatever the Upside Down did to change me." She bites her lip, and I look to Mike for some help. "Mike, you said last night what I have is a 'one-way bond'. That's what got me thinking that it's not actually the vines reaching out to me. If I can learn how to use my... my weird mutation, I can help Will." I look up at Joyce once more. "Please, I need to do this. Nothing you say now will make me change my mind."

She purses her lips and nods, nostrils flaring a bit. "I know. God, I know it won't. Promise me you'll be careful."

I nod back at her. "I promise. I have my walkie, my flare gun, and a weapon at the ready. If I run into trouble, I'm coming straight here. No heroics. *Promise.*"

"Okay." She nods and pulls me into a tight hug. "Okay. I don't like this, but... go."

"Thank you." Joyce releases me and I pull Mike into a quick hug, the taller boy hunching over a bit. "Call me, if something happens. Same frequency."

"Okay." We separate and I readjust the grip on my duffle, refusing to look behind me as I walk down the hall and out the front door. I frown when I notice it's started raining, and pull up the hood of my sweater to give me some protection.

A familiar car rolls to a stop, the engine cutting off as the driver gets out. "Veronica? Where you off to in this weather?" Bob Newby asks, round face kind but eyes worried. I catch them flicking towards the house behind me.

"Camping." I awkwardly twist to show off the bag.

"Oh. Okay. Have fun, and be careful. You're not going too far? It could get heavier?" He comments, walking closer as I descend from the porch.

"No, not too far. I have my walkie, and extra batteries. And a flare gun."

He smiles a bit wider. "Well, at least you're prepared."

I smile back and wave, boots crushing the wet leaves beneath me as the door to the Byers house opens once more, Joyce greeting her boyfriend.

As I disappear into the thicket of the woods, I can't help but feel like I'm coming home. Even with the anxiety nipping at my heels, I don't feel nearly as scared out here as I have the past year.

Good. I'm starting to get tired of being afraid of what makes me happy.

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*3rd Person POV (Steve)...*

Steve woke up later than he wanted, sleep plagued with nightmares of flashing Christmas lights and Veronica's screams. He saw monsters with sharp teeth and heard the swinging of his nail bat, fingers itching to grab it from its spot under his bed.

His house was empty, as usual, his parents due to come home Monday evening. Who the hell knows how long they'd be back, but whatever.

And shit, he still had to write his essay. He'd missed the deadline for early application, but he still had time for the others. He even marked down the different dates on his calendar, so at least his dad can't be on his dick about that. The essay needs work, though. So much work. With Nancy and him not... well, he's more screwed than before. There's always Veronica, but... fuck, he messed that shit up too, didn't he? She's probably hanging out with Hargrove, making nice with Carol and Tommy H like they never had any problems.

*It's bullshit.*

God, he missed her. And he kept missing her, even as he got into his car hours later to go talk to Nancy for some actual closure.

He taps his fingers on the wheel of his car, making the familiar turns on autopilot. As he drives his mind slips back to Thursday, in that stupid little alley behind the gym.

"Tell you what?"

"You love me." He pleaded, staring into Nancy's rounded blue eyes.

*Her lips part a bit, incredulous. But then, it was like she'd let go of all that fight from only a few seconds ago. She sighed and briefly stared down at the ground before looking back up, frowning at Steve. "I... I can't say it. Not the way you want me to."*

Steve shook his head, laughing a little under his breath as anger crawled up from his stomach and into his chest. It was like his whole damn world was narrowing in. "Great. That's fucking awesome. So this past year, it was all bullshit?!"

"No, no. Steve, I really do care about you, but I don't -"

"Love me. I got that, thanks!" He growled. A whole year flashed in his mind, starting a week after the Byers House Incident, when he asked Nancy out again. When he shoved down everything he's ever felt for Veronica because, hey, he's a goddamn coward.

"You know, I'm not the only one who can't say it the way you want to hear it." Nancy spoke up, getting his attention. "You... I know you love me. But do you love me more than you've loved Veronica." And it was like she was staring straight into his soul, tearing him open in different ways than her drunken words did. His heart thumped out Bullshit Bullshit Bullshit as she read him like one of her stupidly thick books. "It's okay, Steve. But if you say you love me more than her? That's what's bullshit."

Before he could respond, Alex rushed out from around the corner, sweat clinging to his shirt. Right, basketball. He was playing basketball before the floor was ripped out from under him. "Harrington! Dude, we need you, man. That douchebag's killing us. Let's go!"

"Alright!"

*"Come on!" Alex walked away and Steve snorted humorlessly before glaring down at Nancy. Yeah, she looked sad, but what the hell did she expect? That he'd be fine with this shit?*

*He scoffed. "I think that you're bullshit."*

Steve shakes his head, then rolls his neck as he turns onto Maple Street, finally rolling to a stop in front of the "Reagan-Bush '84" sign neatly hammered into the front lawn of his ex-girlfriend's house. Nancy's his ex, right? Because it feels like they broke up, but he's not completely sure. Maybe their talk'll clear that up. If she isn't off with Byers, which he should have seen coming. He probably would've, if he wasn't being an idiot about his feelings.

*"You're an idiot, Steve Harrington."* He hears Nancy say, and snorts.

Getting out of his car, he briefly glances down at the sign. His parents are backing Reagan, too, but he knew Veronica's mom likes Mondale and after *actually reading the news* decided he did, too. It made Veronica smile, when he told her a few months back. She looked proud, told him she was happy he wasn't just choosing who to vote for because of his parents.

He walks down the wet grass towards Nancy's front door, the rain thankfully over an hour before. *"Listen, I've been thinking about what you said. You're right. We need to talk about this the right way. I'm sorry - I'm sorry?"* He asks himself, still talking out loud. "What the hell do I have to be sorry for?"

Before he could answer himself, someone called his name. "Steve?" He stops in his tracks and turns in the direction of the voice. A kid with curly brown hair covered in a red, white and blue baseball cap walks up to him, some sort of mic next to his mouth.

"Dustin? What are you -" He asks Veronica's little brother. He actually likes the little dude, but right now Steve's got some shit to handle so he can't really play -

"Nancy isn't home. Come on." Dustin comes up to him as he speaks and tugs his sleeve jacket to pull the larger teen after him. Steve scrambles a bit, Dustin releasing him as the youngest Henderson treks



over to his car.

"What the hell? Hey!" Steve calls after the kid, mind briefly flashing back to Veronica when she's in the same determined mood. Dustin probably gets it from her. "Where is she, then?"

"Doesn't matter."

"Where's your sister?" He can't stop himself from asking.

Dustin pauses and turns, reading his face. There's a lot of that shit going around, isn't there? "Camping. She's camping this weekend."

Steve falters a bit. "Oh." He mutters. *She... she's camping. She's in the woods, alone? What if... what if she has a panic attack? Or something gets her? Or she goes missing?*

"Steve, she's fine." Dustin cuts through, and before Steve can protest anything, the younger teen rolls his eyes. "Come on, we have bigger problems than your love life." Dustin turns around and opens the passenger door to Steve's car. It opens. Shit, did he not lock it? "Do you still have that bat?" Veronica's kid brother asks, briefly turning back around to stare down at Steve.

"Bat? What bat?"

"The one with the nails in it?" Dustin twirls his hand around, like he's swinging it.

"Why?"

"I'll explain it on the way." He starts to enter the car.

"Now?"

"Now!" Dustin whines, eerily similar to Veronica. At least he doesn't have her big, emerald eyes. It's so stupid, but they're definitely her greatest weapon.

And as Steve rushes over to the driver side of his car, he can't help but think shit's definitely about to go down.

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## *Veronica's POV...*

I settle into the thin mattress in Castle Byers, ass cushioned by my sleeping bag. The rain let up, which is nice, but the wood around me is still too damp to make an actual fire, so I settle for wrapping the giant hunting jacket closer to my body, legs crossed beneath me.

I've been going at this for awhile now, judging by the dark sky and moonlight shining through the curtains of Will's fortress. I've been closing my eyes and trying to will myself into the Upside Down. There's gotta be a way, right? If Nancy or Jonathan were here, they'd be reminding me that logic demands certain rules. Therefore, if the vines aren't the ones pulling me into a different dimension, I'm the one doing it.

Maybe it's my medication? My hormones or whatever are already unbalanced, so I take pills for depression and anxiety to stabilize everything. So when my mood start to switch up I lose control. Dustin's obsessed with the X-Men comics. There's Jean Grey, and she becomes the Phoenix after some shit goes down. Then, uh, Mastermind? Emma Frost? Someone makes her hallucinate the death of the man she loves. Cyclops, Scott Summers. So she loses control and accepts this power she'd never actually be able to contain, and she becomes the Dark Phoenix.

Damn, I remember more than I thought.

Powers are always linked with emotions. I can still see the resolve on El's face when she was killing the Demogorgon. I know she'd been all over the place before, the boys told me so after, but when she figured out something to focus on, she... she did what she had to do.

I won't let my emotions keep me from saving Hopper. I'm not losing another person in November.

With a deep breath in and out, I go for a different tactic. I'm not going to force myself into the Upside Down. It's gotta be smooth, like opening a door.

I grab my walkman from where it rests next to me, and slip my headphones over ears, muffling the sounds of nature a bit. I'm not

exactly excited to do that, but I've got traps set up around me. Shock got me out of the Upside Down before, it can do so again.

I press play, and 'Rock You Like A Hurricane' starts to play. I smile, then nod my head around, dancing to the music. I think about Billy, and thinking about Billy makes my mind -

My mind slips back to his anger. The fire in his eyes, his willingness to fight. His hand on my ass as we walked past a sad Steve.

My finger quickly presses onto the button to skip the song. 'Cherry Bomb' starts to play, but as much as this song so represents me, I skip it. I skip Judas Priest, I skip The Clash. I skip 'Old Time Rock n Roll' because all I can think about is Steve's *Risky Business* costume which makes me think about *Tina's Halloween party* and *bullshit*.

It isn't until the tape lands on the trumpet intro of my secret favorite song that I stop and smile. 'Boogie Woogie Bugle Boy' by the Andrews Sisters. The song I cook to. When Steve would come over, I'd dance around the kitchen and harmonize over the sound of popcorn popping and Steve laughing.

I close my eyes, and focus on that. It's not one particular moment, because it's happened more than once. But it's good, and calming, and familiar.

The Andrews Sisters' singing begins to fade out, like I'm getting further away. I open my eyes.

And it goddamn worked. But, not how I expected. I'm not in the Upside Down version of Castle Byers. I'm... I'm back in my dream? The tunnel is lighter than I thought it was, or maybe something else is brightening it. Flecks fall down around me so I know I'm still in the Upside Down. I'm walking over the vines, and they slither out of the way. In the distance, I can hear voices. Multiple voices. They shake with fear and relief all at once. They're so familiar.

Something in me moves faster, because sooner than I'd imagined I'm standing behind Joyce, who's hugging Hopper close to her, Bob waving his flashlight around in disbelief.

I let out a relieved sob. "Hopper!" I cry out, running closer, but it's like they don't hear me. *Not dead. Not dead. Not dead.* "Hopper, you're okay!" *Alive. Alive. Alive.* Tears slide down my cheeks and I reach out grab onto Joyce, but my hand falls through her body. "Wh-what? Joyce. Joyce!" I cry out.

Nothing.

I see a suited-up person quietly walk up behind them and attempt to scream out in warning, but the three adults don't hear me. Hell, I can't really hear them. I look down at my hands and see my body's starting to flicker like a light bulb, off-on, off-on.

"No. No, come on. *Come on!*" I scream to myself. Hopper, Joyce, and Bob are whisked away and I shriek, reaching towards them. More men in Hazmat suits come closer, carrying... are those blowtorches?

I get my answer when they set fire to the vines, all of them shrieking and withering but I remain unaffected. There's no pain. There's no heat. I'm not even suffocating. My body flickers more, but I can't hold on any longer. The last thing I hear before I close my eyes and feel the world around me disappearing is something screaming.

I gasp for breath and open my eyes, tumbling off the mattress and landing on my front. I look around in confusion. Vaguely hearing Metallica banging out in my ears I rip off my headphones and toss my walkman behind me.

I never even left Castle Byers. Not physically. What if the other times I've been in the Upside Down, it's been the same? Only this time I gave myself a location, somewhere to look rather than subconsciously leaving it to chance? See, this is why I should have paid more attention to comic books rather than fleeting interest.

Dustin's gonna be so proud of me.

In the Upside Down, the vines could still grab me. They could sense me. The shadow monster could, too. Because they're a part of that world, and the other people weren't. See kids, this is why science is important.

Me not physically being in the Upside Down also mean that... that I've never been trapped there. Not like I was a year ago, anyway. I've been projecting myself without control because I haven't been taking command of my emotions. I've been hiding things and shutting them away and pretending everything's fine. God, I'm so over that. This is it, I'm done. I'm going to actually move on in a healthy way.

And crap, I need to tell Mike, and Will, an-and Dustin!

I reach over to grab my walkie talkie, rolling over to see it's on the mattress. I army crawl my way towards it, but every move I make leaves me fighting to keep my eyes open. So as soon as my hand curls around the device, it's only fitting my body and my mind give in to exhaustion.

## 15. The Spy

Hi all, and welcome to my *Stranger Things* Steve Harrington/OC story! It's been a long, long time coming. Seriously. Since 2017 long.

In this story, we've got the Ice Queen of Hawkins, the older-but-shorter-by-season 2 sister of Dustin Henderson, because he deserves an older sibling. She's Veronica, and even though *Heathers* came out in 1989 I've taken the liberty of borrowing some of my favorite quotes because *Winona Ryder Easter Eggs*. Seriously, I cannot overstate my love for that movie. Anyway, there's more of a backstory for the Henderson family, including adding the dad to the "asshole fathers club", co-president with Lonnie Byers, the prick. Expect explicit language because, hello, *Stranger Things* isn't known for censoring language.

Damn, this took forever to write. Work hit me, then I broke my computer, then work hit me again. But nevertheless I persisted, and this chapter is finally done. Yay. Roll out the shots, light up that cake.

Alright, as usual we follow after we left off. Veronica managed to figure out her powers enough to see Hopper being rescued, but then lost control and was pulled out. I've bullshitted a lot about her powers and the Upside Down because we don't know a lot about it and I don't have time to wait for season 4 and learn more about it. So, yeah, down the line if we learn something new about that funky place, I'll incorporate canon as much as possible but also won't really stress over the rules, because it's a little too late. Anyway, I finally figured out what's been throwing her out of whack. I take a cocktail of antidepressants and anxiety medication daily, and know how that shit usually balances hormones and stuff out. I figured that same constant balancing would play a role in affecting when Veronica is able to see the Upside Down, so I just went with it. I'm doing my best to make sure what she can do doesn't take away from the importance of Will and his possession and stuff, but I also like writing a character who isn't all-seeing/all-powerful. It makes

everything more challenging. Anyway, I hope the stuff concerning her "mutation" makes enough sense. I'm kind of making it up as I go along.

Also in this chapter; we have Dustin and Steve bonding and two full scenes from Steve's POV (as usual written in third person). Both guys have something to say about relationships and our favorite archer, someone's loud mouth reveals the truth to the other, and Steve faces the wrath of a girl worried about the advice he gave her brother. It's all very cute, though. We get a little bit of Max and Veronica bonding outside of Billy, but the bulk of the bonding comes in the next two chapters. Veronica overhears something about how Billy treats Max that she'd focus on if they weren't busy dealing with a baby demogorgon, and we finally see Veronica in full action without the injuries she had the year prior. Remember, she's been training harder than ever at archery, so her badassery is to be expected because she actually worked for it. I want no accusations of a Mary Sue - we're what, 15 chapters in now? It shouldn't come as a surprise that Veronica is capable of whooping some interdimensional ass. I'm not saying any of that to be rude, I just want to cover my bases because I know it's been awhile since I uploaded a chapter (again, my bad folks). The next one will be up ASAP, and I'm super excited for what's to come.

Enjoy the story! I only own Veronica.

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I wake to the sound of scratching. Not animal scratching, static-scratching. Like a broken needle on a turntable or a TV on the fritz.

**"Ica. Ver. Ica. Do. Copy? Ver. Ica. Co. Son. Bitch."**

Vision blurry and neck a little sore, I reach around for the source of the noise. My hand touches my walkie talkie and I bring it close to my face, rubbing my eyes with my free hand. **"Veronica, this is Dustin. Do you copy? Code red. We have a code red."**

With a gasp I sit up, world turning a bit from the force of my crunch. "This is Veronica, I copy!" There's radio silence for a moment too long. With an exhausted groan I press down on the button once more.

"Ye said I was no archer, but say so now again!" It feels strange, saying those words - I haven't had to use that quote since the junkyard incident last year.

**"Son of a bitch, Veronica! I've been calling you for hours! Over."** Dustin's angry voice comes through, all scratchy from the poor reception.

"Sorry. I, uh, I knocked right out. Over." I blink and look around Castle Byers, nearly slapping myself silly for passing out when I should have been up and making sure the area was secure. I'm out of practice.

*Practice.*

The events of last night hit me like a train, and I scramble off the mattress, bemoaning the fact I never changed into pyjamas, so my jeans made an imprint on my stomach. **"Where the hell are you, Leia? Over."** My brother asks me, and I falter a bit at the nickname. He hasn't called me that in a while.

"Castle Byers. I'm at Castle Byers. Why, what's going on? Where's the fire? Over."

**"Look, I can't... I have to tell you in person. Over."**

I breathe out. "Jesus Christ, D. What did you do? Over."

**"Something really stupid. You can hit me later. Look, remember the junkyard fr-from last year? Over."**

I nod, even though he can't see me. "Ye-yeah. I remember."

**"Great, okay. Did dad ever take you by the train tracks? Have you seen them before? They lead to the junkyard. Over."**

"I know where they are. Do you need me to come home and bring you there? Over."

**"No. Can you meet us there in an hour? Over."**

"Yeah. Of course. Wait, 'us'? Who the hell is 'us'? Over." I ask,



wondering if the rest of the Party is with him. Shit, I should probably tell them about the Shadow Monster, right? About Will? I would have told Jonathan if I knew where he and Nancy were, but I haven't seen them since Thursday, and it's Saturday now.

**"I'm with Steve Harrington. We'll meet you where the tracks start. Bring your weapons. Over and out."**

Before I can say anything, his end goes clicks off, leaving me more disoriented than when he woke me up.

Why the hell is my brother with Steve?

---

I trudge through the mud, shifting my weight in my boots so I don't slip around on the wet leaves. Though I'm armed to the teeth, I don't want to alert anything else of my presence so I keep my steps light and careful.

I haven't been to the junkyard since last year, so it's been awhile since I wandered down the tracks. Still, I used to visit them once a week for years - since I was twelve - so muscle memory has taken over.

As I look around me, at the dew gleaming on the leaves and the staggered trees, I can't help but remember my first time in this part of the woods.

*"Jonathan, c'mon man, we've been out here for five hours. Your mom's bringing home Benny's, and I'm freaking hungry!" I complained, hopping from rock to rock, in sync with the clicking coming from my best friend's camera.*

*"Ver, I promise we'll feed that bottomless pit you call a stomach soon, but I have to get some more diverse shots or Mr. Adams will be on my ass." I rolled my eyes and mouthed along to his words, laughing as he shook his head. "Just because I can't see you, doesn't mean I don't know what you're doing."*

*"You suck, you know that? You're a total killjoy." I jogged up to walk beside him, legs having to stretch further than his to keep up with his stride. Every now and then we'd stop, my arms crossed impatiently as the*

*cool January air sent shivers down our spines.*

*"Are you done yet?" I finally asked, nearly exploding into icy shards. "Because I can't feel my damn toes, and normally I wouldn't complain but you said two hours, and it's been six!"*

*Jonathan laughed and turned around, walking backwards. "I swear, the only time you're impatient is when food's involved. Just give me half an -" He went crashing on his ass with a yelp, camera fumbling around in his hands before he caught with visible relief.*

*I couldn't help it. I laughed. A full-bellied cackle. I just laughed, and laughed, and laughed.*

*My dad had been gone nearly three months, you see. So, despite the bruises that no doubt formed on his ass, Jonathan shot up just as excitedly as I laughed, two of us embracing in a long, sob-filled hug.*

I blink back into the present, realizing I've been staring beyond the treeline to my left, like I would be able to actually see me and Jonathan.

Jonathan, my brother, who has no idea about what's actually been going on with me and Will. Who doesn't know about the shadow monster. He's going to hate me for all of it, when he finds out.

My fingers itch for my walkie. I tried getting in contact with Mike and Will after Dustin got in contact with me. Nothing. So I stopped at the house, and it was empty. I thought about calling someone - maybe the station, to see if Hopper came in after being rescued, or if he was at a hospital - when a voice sounding eerily like said man's reminded me that the Lab would be monitoring calls to the station that sounded remotely suspicious. Asking about the return of the Chief of Police, and that question coming from a girl who escaped the Upside Down would both definitely count as "suspicious".

I couldn't stay, though, or investigate further. Dustin needs me, after all.

I march on, continuing on my path, relying on muscle memory to get me where I need to go. While the train tracks do cross through most

of the woods, there's a specific point where they burst out from the ground rather than remain buried thanks to erosion. You can even park your car near there, which I'm sure is what Steve's doing if he's with Dustin.

Why the hell is he with Dustin, anyway? I mean, they know each other, but D rarely talks about him unless I bring him up.

I trek over a collection of boulders, boots thankfully doing their job so I don't slide all over the wet rocks. My slightly baggy jeans have a few holes in them, sending the early November chill up my legs. My sweater is thin enough that it doesn't weigh me down, but thick enough that I'm not freezing. Not that I could, anyway - dad's hunting jacket is helping on that front.

My hip quiver's attached to my belt, occasionally brushing against my left leg but not in an irritating way. I have my walkie clipped on my right hip, a reassuring weight, along with Jonathan's old hunting knife. While I'm used to doing my business in the woods while camping, my quick stop at the empty Byers house allowed me to reapply the gauze on my hands sanitarily. The white wraps aren't as thick as they've been the past two days, but they provide me with some warmth. I mean, my fingers are still cold, especially after I smoked my last two cigarettes.

And boy does that suck. Not for my lungs, obviously. But definitely my nerves.

My backpack's light, at least, considering I've been hiking for almost an hour and there are no aches going on. All I've got in there is my First Aid kit, walkman, extra batteries, flare gun, and water. The rest of my shit's at Castle Byers, packed away.

I take a sip from my bottle of water, cold thanks to the weather, and grin when I hear a familiar engine cutting off in the distance. Still, I know there's darkness lurking in these woods, so my right hand remains wrapped around my bow.

The voices I hear as I walk through some bushes confirm their identities before I even lay eyes on them. Dustin's busy shutting off his walkie, having just griped at Lucas. Meanwhile Steve is slamming

the trunk of his car, hands covered in yellow cleaning gloves. He's also carrying a heavy-looking bucket, and wearing his usual Nikes, a blue-grey jacket, and a backpack with his nail-bat tucked inside.

Dustin's wearing matching yellow gloves, and as he stands also picks up a heavy bucket. "Son of a bitch, where the hell's Leia?"

"Dude, relax, she'll be here." Steve reassures him, sounding a little irritated. Guess my brother's been antsier than usual.

"We can't waste any time, she -"

"D! Calm down." I announces myself, stepping quietly through the foliage. Dustin jumps, but sighs in relief when he sees me. Before I can say anything else, he drops the bucked and rushes to me, wrapping me in a surprisingly strong hug.

I gasp for breath but hug him back. "What's wrong?"

"I'm sorry! I'm sorry, I messed up, and I get why we don't keep secrets from each other anymore. I'm sorry!"

I peer over his shoulder and up at Steve, a questioning look on my face. He bites his lip nervously and shifts his weight.

Something bad happened.

And shit, they need to hear about this, too.

"It's okay, D. Whatever you kept from me. There's something I need to tell you, too. So we're even. Got it?"

"Got it." He confirms, breaking away from me.

I look back up at Steve, who's awkwardly standing by his car. "Steve." I greet, smiling softly.

What, I missed him. Sue me.

"Roni." His awkward stance morphs into a comfortable lean, his lips quirking up in amusement and his eyes clearer than they've been since Halloween and our big blow out. It's almost like the first time

we saw each other, all those years ago in middle school. Even with the way my world's flipped and all this shit taking over my mind, it's like everything's settled.

I begin to feel guilty, too. I'm with Billy now. And while it's definitely not "love" I do legitimately like him. Like, I'm not using him to get over Steve. I'm allowing myself to be happy.

I also realistically can't move on from feelings I've had for almost two years, in less than a month.

"You look good." Steve tells me, after a few moments of comfortable silence. I furrow my brows and look at my outfit - I mean, I don't look crazy by any means, but I haven't showered in a day and my blonde curls were pulled into the messiest ponytail ever. "No! I mean, not like that. Well, you do, like always, but I meant... it's nice to see you, uh, here. In the woods."

"Oh. Uh, well, thank you."

He nods and scratches at the back of his famous hair. My brother blinks between the both of us, smirks, then clears his throat. "As cute as that was, we need to move. Come on!" He picks up his bucket - full of chunks of raw meat, what the hell? - and proceeds to walk past Steve and the car and into the woods towards the start of the visible tracks.

I tilt my head then look at Steve again, who flushes a bit and clears his throat before picking up his bucket of meat. "Do I need -"

"No!" He shakes his head. "No, you're good. Besides," Steve smiles at me, "between the two of us, you're the better fighter." I grin back and walk with him, moving just behind Dustin.

"So, baby bro, what's up?" I ask after a handful of silent minutes, the boys shifting nervously. "Seriously, 'fess up and I will, too."

"Okay. Okay." Dustin waits for us to catch up, then stands between Steve and me. "I want you to remember that I prefaced this with 'I did something stupid.' So you can totally be pissed at me, but I also know I messed up so it's not like I'm pretending I'm innocent."

"Dustin. What. Did. You. Do?" I ask, voice direct so he gets to the point, or he'll talk himself out of this very necessary conversation."

*"I accidentally adopted a demogorgon and it grew to the size of a dog and killed Mews so I lost it."*

I blink at him, eyes narrowed. Because despite how fast he spoke, I'm used to it, which means I heard exactly what he said.

"You adopted a demogorgon and named it Dart, and Dart killed Mews." I repeat, and he nods in confirmation. "You kept a demogorgon in the house and it killed our mom's cat."

"Yes."

"Jesus Christ, D!" I finally shout, less angry and more disappointed. "How the hell did you even find one?"

"It was in our trash can, looking for food, and I couldn't just leave it there!"

"So you brought it into the house?"

"He was the size of a slug! I didn't know he was a demogorgon until Dart ate Mews!" Dustin yelps back.

I frown and rub my forehead with my free hand. "Dustin, man, come on."

"I didn't know, I swear I didn't know!" He promises, eyes welling up with tears. "I was just... I felt so alone, Leia. And Dart was alone, too, and he was my friend. I'm so sorry!"

Any residual anger from the news fades out, and without hesitating I pull him into a hug, keeping my arms wound tight around his body. "Oh, D, shh. I'm sorry you felt alone. I'm sorry I wasn't there enough - that I haven't been there enough for you recently."

"It's okay. You-you've needed time to heal. It's okay."

"No." I shake my head and move back, wiping the tears off his soft cheeks. "It isn't okay. You are one of the most important people in my life, and I let you down. I haven't been myself. I kept saying who I've

become is who I really am. I was so, so wrong. I know I've been different these past five years, even before the Upside Down. I'm sorry you've been stuck with the Ice Queen for an older sister."

"You're an amazing sister, okay, so shut up about that. And you aren't the Ice Queen with me. You're just Veronica, my Huntress."

I smile at his words, then frown and drop my hands from his cheeks. He furrows his brows and I sigh, staring at him and Steve. "We should keep moving."

"What about your 'confession'?" Dustin asks me as we take the final few steps onto the tracks.

"I need to find the right words, first." I admit, the three of us walking over the tracks and the boys tossing chunks of meat on the ground - bait for Dart the demogorgon. Nice and bloody. "Okay. Well, you know how Will's been having episodes?" I ask Dustin, who nods.

"Wait, little Byers is having episodes?" Steve cuts in.

"Yeah. Well, I've been having them, too. At first I just thought they were bad dreams or hallucinations from PTSD, or even my mess being out of whack. But, um, they're real."

"Real?" Steve asks.

Dustin blinks, though, taking my hand gently in his eyes. "Oh my God, you're like Will! You've got true sight!" He exclaims.

"True sight? What the hell does that mean?" Steve's started to get an angry little flush, and I silently breathe in.

This won't end well.

Before Dustin can jump in and spiral, I clear my throat. "Yes. Well, sort of. You see, with Will, it's like the connection goes both ways. He can see the Upside Down and the Mind Flayer, and they can see him, but with me, it's different. I thought it was the Upside Down only being able to see me, but it's the opposite. I'm the one who can see that world, not the other way around. Not unless I allow them to, I think. My depression and anxiety medication have made it so I don't

have control, because they're stabilizers."

"And those stabilizers balance out everything in your brain, which plays a role in you seeing into the Upside Down." Dustin follows my train of thought.

"Exactly! But now that I know that I've been subconsciously losing control of both when I see through the plane and when I get out of it, I've worked on actually controlling it." I look down briefly. "I only managed to once, last night. And I realized that while sometimes I really am walking in the Upside Down and Hawkins at once, I can project myself there, too, without moving from my spot in the normal world."

"Cool, like Dr. Strange!"

"No, Dustin, not cool." Steve interrupts, fingers twitching a bit with nerves and cheeks flushed with anger. He stops walking and stares down at me, and while he's definitely pissed off the concern in his eyes is calming rather than intimidating.

He doesn't hate me. He's just worried. God, he's been worried this whole time, and I've been an idiot about it.

"You... how long has this been going on? How did you know they were real? Who else knows? Does Jonathan?"

I bite my lip and side-step Dustin so I can carefully put my free hand on top of Steve's. "I know you're upset. You have every right to be. This wasn't because I don't trust you. You're my best friend, Steve, of course I trust you. I didn't tell you because I was afraid I'd been losing my mind. I didn't trust myself." He starts to speak but I shake my head. "No, let me talk first. They started when I got out of the Upside Down. That's when I thought they were hallucinations. Dr. Owens - the Hawkins Lab guy in charge of mine and Will's appointment - told me that whatever toxins, organisms, I'd breathed in down there changed my DNA. Made me a mutant, or, um, like the Fantastic Four. That's a better analogy." He tilts his head. "Right, sorry, comic book characters. Anyway," I look up at Dustin, who's leaning against me a bit, "they got worse on Christmas Eve. Then this past week, it's like Will and I have been on the same frequency. We've seen the same



thing, at the same time, only I'm invisible to it. It's like I don't matter to the Upside Down, because even when the Mind Flayer finally saw me he just swirled around my body like a fucked-up tornado then disappeared -"

"The Mind Flayer attacked you?" Dustin panics.

I nod. "Yeah, or at least wanted me to submit. It got Will, though. Got in him."

"Will, where is he?" Dustin asks, still panicking.

I bite my lip and hold in a sob. "I don't know. I saw him yesterday, with Mike and Joyce. We were... we were looking for Hopper. He was missing. We found him in these tunnel things, I think, but when I left for the woods I didn't know where. Then when I astral-projected myself last night, I saw Bob and Joyce rescuing him, and then the scientists burning the vines. But when I went to check in on them this morning, the house was empty. I didn't want to make a call and alert the Lab about anything. I don't trust them."

"Yeah, for good reason." Dustin gripes, and I smile. Then I refocus on Steve, my eyebrows furrowing in confusion when I notice his fingers twitching, like he's itching to reach out for something.

"Steve?" I whisper, blinking up at him. He just gives me a slight head shake and clears his throat.

"We, uh, should probably keep moving."

I nod, breathing out. "Right, yeah. I'll go on ahead, scout around. Make sure things are safe."

"Are you sure you're okay out here?" Dustin asks me, worriedly biting at his lips.

I look around, wincing when some branches swing in the breeze like the vines. There's that itching under my skin, like my body is fighting my mind for control, nerves singing to go back in the Upside Down. "Don't stay too far behind." Is my answer, and I set off in front of them, wrapped right hand clutching my bow like it's anchoring me in Hawkins.

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### 3rd Person POV (Steve)...

Steve sighs as he watches Roni walk ahead of them, the three companions having followed the train tracks for almost an hour in relative silence. So far she hasn't seemed to project herself or whatever, and there hasn't been the usual level of panic he's unfortunately observed from her. Hell, just two weekends ago she nearly stumbled over her feet on their jog, when they got a little too close to the woods.

But now she's marching ahead like some sort of soldier, shoulders rolled back and posture more straight than when she's confronting a dickhead. It's the same way she held herself last year when this shit went down. He knows he shouldn't be relieved to see her so ready to throw down, but... but it's good to see her back in her element.

Still, he's worried for her. He always worries about her. He has since he overheard his parents gossiping about her father, that time they were home for three consecutive months. He was in the eighth grade, Roni was in the seventh, and while she would smile at him in passing Steve's sure he wasn't on her radar. But she was on his, had been for years. There was just something so magnetic about her, and it keeps on pulling him in.

God, he misses her. Ever since she met Hargrove, it's like he doesn't matter. Yeah, he was with Nancy, and it's a total douchebag move to be jealous of her being with another guy when he was too chicken shit to get the girl. The right girl for him.

He still feels the anger burning through his veins from Hargrove's words. *"She's mine. That just kills you, right? Huh, Harrington? That I'm the one who gets to touch her. Feel her. Take care of her. She's never going to be yours. See, you spent so much time trying with Wheeler that you let the real prize slip away. And I won her. She's mine."*

Dickhead. He should tell Roni about that shit, right? She's his best friend, regardless of how he feels about her. She needs to know.

But Hargrove also makes her happy, happier than she's been in awhile. He should let her have that.

So he looks away from Roni and focuses on Dustin, the younger Henderson throwing down chunks of raw meat absentmindedly. Huh, the youngest Henderson had actually gotten a little ahead. Steve sighs, tired of the silence. "Alright, so let me get this straight. You kept something you knew was probably dangerous in order to impress a girl who... who you just met?"

A bell-like laugh rings out, and Steve smiles breathlessly when he sees Roni's shoulders shaking with mirth. She gets further away, most likely not wanting to tease her brother too much after the shit the two finally admitted to each other.

Yeah, he's not over it either. Dart and the fact Roni'd been so closed-off about what she was dealing with. He knew about the PTSD last Thanksgiving, but Roni never brought it up again and he thought the hallucinations had gone away with time. Freaking assumed some more bullshit.

That ends now. From now on, he isn't letting her hide anything as traumatizing as what she's been going through. He won't allow himself to be distracted from her anymore.

"Alright, that's grossly oversimplifying things." Dustin finally responds.

"I mean, why would a girl like some nasty slug anyway?" He asks, still confused by Roni's nerdy little brother. He's a cool kid though, almost as tough as his older sister.

"An interdimensional slug? Because it's awesome."

Steve catches up to the younger male, multitasking by keeping an eye out on Roni as she gets further away. "Well, even if she thought it was cool - which she didn't, I... I just don't... I don't know. I just feel like you're trying way too hard."

"Well, not everyone can have your perfect hair, alright?" Dustin gripes.

"It's not about the hair, man." Okay, this kid needs some help. Like, yesterday. "The key with girls is just... just acting like you don't care."

Crap, not what he meant to say. Whatever, roll with it. It does work, when it comes to the easier girls. Not sleezy-easy. Safe.

"Even if you do?"

"Yeah, it drives them nuts." Steve looks ahead at Roni, wishing that technique worked on her. And yeah, sometimes he felt like she was interested in him the same way, but that's not possible. Steve was a dick by choice, and then he just became one for real. "Don't be a dick about it." He finally amends. "But... don't come off as too interested. Let them come to you."

Dustin nods, throwing down some more meat. Steve does the same, feeling a little less guilty for his earlier advice.

"Then what?" The kid asks, looking up at Steve.

"You just wait until you, uh..." Steve glances at Roni before continuing, hoping she's far enough away not to hear the former playboy of Hawkins dispense his wisdom on her innocent little brother. The kid needs it, though. Steve wishes he had someone to help him with girls and relationships. "Until you feel it." He nudges at Dustin affectionately, having liked the little dude ever since he confronted him on Roni's birthday.

"Feel what?"

"It's like before it's gonna storm, you know? You can't see it, but you can feel it, like this, uh..." Steve purses his lips in thought, thinking up the word for only a moment before finishing his sentence. "Electricity, you know?"

Dustin nods in understanding. "Oh, like in the electromagnetic field when the clouds in the atmosphere-"

"No, no, no, no, no." Steve cuts him off. Man, the kids way smarter than he is. That's depressing. "Like a... like a *sexual* electricity." Aw, shit. If Roni finds out he said that, Steve's so dead.

"Oh." Dustin accepts, nodding his head in understanding. Well, probably attempting to understand. The dude's still only 13.

Steve decides to just go for it, then. No use having all this wisdom about girls and not sharing it with the youngest Henderson. "You feel that and then you make your move."

"So that's when you kiss her?"

"No, whoa, whoa. Slow down, Romeo!" Steve shuts that down.

"Sorry." Dustin apologizes, actually regretful. It feels good, having someone look up to him. "Sure, okay, some girls, yeah, they want you to be aggressive. You know, strong, hot and heavy, like a... like a lion."

"Hmm." Dustin hums, now walking a little behind Steve, who continues.

"But others, you gotta be slow, you gotta be stealthy, like a ninja." He turns his head and smirks down at Dustin, throwing some more meat on the ground.

"What type is Nancy?" The kid asks, and Steve falters a bit, his heart a little pained.

In the chaos of last night and the anxiousness of today, he hasn't really thought about Nancy, off with Jonathan most likely. No matter the bombshell that came with him finally fully accepting both he and Nancy had been bullshit, rejection from someone you've come to love still hurts. Maybe it really hurts because them being bullshit stopped them from being with the people they truly love. Maybe it really hurts because Nancy gets to be with Byers, but Steve has to watch the new King of Hawkins cozy up with Roni.

"Nancy's different. She's different than the other girls." Steve finally responds, memories of their relationship flash-forwarding through his mind.

"Yeah, she seems pretty special, I guess." He nods at Dustin's words, but his eyes are trained on Roni's back.

"Yeah, she was."

They walk in silence for a few moments before Dustin asks Steve

something that makes him stumble a bit. "And Veronica? What kind of girl is she?"

"I, uh... what?" Steve asks, looking down at the kid.

He knows, he knows, he knows.

Dustin just looks up at him with big blue eyes, reading the older male in the same way Roni does. "You got her a ring for her birthday."

"She's my friend. *Best friend.*" He amends.

"You're dating Nancy."

Steve snorts. "Not anymore, kid."

"Oh." Dustin nods then clears his throat. "But still, you *were* dating Nancy. And I know you were a dick to her, but I'm pretty sure that's because you were pulling Leia's pigtails."

Steve snorts self-condescendingly. "Yeah. I was. And I was a dick." Steve sighs and keeps looking at Roni.

"I don't think she knows. No, actually, I know she doesn't have a clue about your feelings for her." Dustin offers, and Steve breathes out in relief. Oh, thank God. "Leia's smart and observant when it comes to most people, but she's oblivious about herself a lot of the time, and about things concerning her. Like her hallucinations being real, and about people who matter liking her." He admits, and Steve nods along because yeah, he knows she is. It's goddamn endearing, for the most part. It was mainly frustrating, back when he actually had the balls to tell her how he feels. Now it just makes him happy that there's still some innocence in her, that she isn't as hardened as she makes herself - and others - believe.

Yeah, he's always seen her.

So for the first time, Steve finally opens up about the girl he's come to love. If only it wasn't to her little brother, but whatever, it's time. "Roni... Veronica... she's different, too. Not in the way Nancy was. I guess because it actually really matters when it comes to her. Not that Nancy didn't matter."

"She just isn't Veronica." Dustin responds, voice soft.

Steve nods, relieved the kid understands he isn't trying to talk shit about Nancy. She's still an amazing person. "Right. Well, with Nancy, I did have to be a ninja. I took control, but I also let her. I guess she's more the 'slow and steady wins the race' kind of girl. But Roni? Man, she's... she's the type of girl who you've got no choice but to be honest with, like, emotionally, or you've got not shot at even making a move on her. I kept messing up by being a dick and thinking I could just act like she meant nothing to me, when she means everything to me." Steve blushes a bit, but Dustin doesn't seem to notice as he hangs onto every word. "See, I didn't find a good balance between 'not caring' and 'you matter to me'. It exists, somewhere. Back then, when I had a chance with her, it made me sick to my stomach every time I was a complete dick to her or pretended to ignore her existence. Then it was fun, bantering with her. She's awesome, man. Like, in terms of sisters, you lucked out."

Dustin dimples, grinning. "I know. She's the best."

"She really is, isn't she?" Steve smiles as he briefly checks on Roni, smiling when he sees that she's still too far away to hear their conversation.

"You love her." Steve stumbles again, breathing in sharply. "Like, you seriously love her."

He can't help himself. "Yeah. For almost four years now. I've liked her since I was in the sixth grade and found myself wishing I could pass by her in the halls. I just... man I was so stupid about it. That's why I'm helping you. I wish someone had helped me when it came to Roni." Steve admits, and he feels light for the first time in years, like this weight has been lifted off his chest. So this is why people tell the truth, huh? It really does 'set you free' or whatever.

"Oh. Thank you." Dustin smiles up at Steve, throwing down some more meat in time with the older teen. "For the record, though, I'm pretty sure she's still in love with you."

Steve nearly faceplants on the worn-out tracks. "What?!" He whispers, sharply, and he watches Dustin's eyes grow as big as his sister's.

"She... love... she told you about me?" He whispers, again, body almost going into shock.

Dustin shakes his head. "She didn't tell me anything, but she knows I'm not stupid. I may not know shit about other girls, but I know my sister very well. She's been in love with you for probably three years now. Not as long as you've been in love with her, but... you matter to her, too. That's why I confronted you on her birthday. I thought you were playing with her feelings back then. But the way you looked at each other, it made me realize you did, *do*, care. I mean, you bought Leia her favorite flowers. You got her a ring. You let her drive your car. And, like, dude, you're always watching her. But not in a gross way. Not like she's property or whatever." Dustin nods and keeps looking at Steve, who's still having a hard time breathing. Jesus Christ, he could have been with her this whole time? Man, what a fucking mess. "And look, I know she has a boyfriend now, but even I'm smart enough to know that whatever she feels about him is nothing like what she feels for you. I've seen her staring, too. And, like, you two have that electricity you were telling me about."

Steve rolls his eyes and snorts. "Alright, alright. Enough about me. What about this girl? What's she like?"

He's relieved when Dustin answers the question, moving their discussion away from the mess that is *Steve and Veronica*. "She's special, too. There's just, like, something about her."

That makes Steve freeze in concern. "Whoa, whoa, whoa. Hey, hey, hey." He stops Dustin.

"What?" The kid asks, confused. Jesus, it's like Henderson's purposefully ignoring the conversation they just had about him and Roni.

"You're not falling in love with this girl, are you?" Steve asks, and he absentmindedly feels some meat falling from his gloved hands and landing on the ground.

"Uh, no. No." Steve watches Dustin shake his head.

"Okay, good. Don't." Steve frowns and keeps walking.



"I won't." Dustin promises, sounding a little confused by the sudden hostility.

"She's only going to break your heart, and you're way too young for that shit." Steve grumbles, heart filling with regret as he looks at Roni, again. Even with the darkness she was probably seeing, the fear she was feeling, she holds her head high and marches on. She didn't mean to break his heart and definitely doesn't know she did, but she still did. Hell, he probably kept breaking hers without knowing he did, too.

She broke his heart when she took off her ring and said she needed to take a break from it. Like it was weighing her down. Damn, he really was an idiot. That should have told him how she really felt about him, when he was too blinded by self-doubt to recognize it was all mutual. She broke his heart when she started walking around with hickies and smiled more because of another guy. Dustin said she loves him, but Steve's actually seen her around Hargrove. He knows what she feels for him, despite it being new, is real. Realer than Steve's relationship with Nancy, at least. Maybe if he'd been braver, he'd be walking with Roni right now, rather than watching the girl he loves walk away and move on.

He sighs and glances down, biting his lip when he notices how sad the kid looks. He knows he was too harsh in his warning, and even though he and Dustin have only very recently started getting to know each other outside of Roni, hurting the kid makes him feel all disappointed in himself.

Well, in the spirit of being honest...

Steve nudges Dustin affectionately. "Fabergé." He admits.

"What?" The kid looks up in confusion.

Damn it. Steve sighs and points up at his hair. "It's Fabergé Organics. Use the shampoo and conditioner, and when your hair's damp - it's not wet, okay?" Steve turns and stops Dustin briefly. "When it's damp..."

"Damp." Dustin repeats.

Steve breathes out. "You do four puffs of the Farrah Fawcett spray."

He looks away as the youngest Henderson snickers under his breath. "Farrah Fawcett spray?"

And shit, Steve knew this was gonna happen. "Yeah, Farrah Fawcett." He stops walking and forces his companion to, too. He gets a little in the kid's face, only posturing a little, and points warningly at him with raw meat still clenched in his hand. "You tell anyone I just told you that and your ass is grass. You're dead Henderson, do you understand?"

Dustin's eyes fill with a touch of fear and he nods. "Yup."

Amused, Steve just sighs in relief. "Okay." He throws down the meat in his hand and keeps walking, Dustin trailing behind him like a duck. And, like, a year ago Steve would've been irritated about bonding with a middle schooler, but now he feels a little less alone.

"Farrah Fawcett, really?" Dustin mutters amusedly.

Steve laughs under his breath, knocking into his companion. "I mean, she's hot." Not as hot as Roni, but...

"Dude, gross." Dustin complains. "Don't talk about my sister like that." Steve blushes, realizing he'd said that last bit out loud.

"Sorry man. To be fair, it's true."

"Gross."

Steve laughs and walks a little ahead. "It's mainly just nice to see her happy, you know. Like, Hargrove's a dick, but -"

"He tried to run me and my friends over!" Steve stops and turns, confused by what Dustin just said.

"Who did?"

"Hargrove. Billy Hargrove, on Halloween." The kid looks shocked, like he's surprised he admitted it. How long had he been holding that in?

Steve starts to see red, anger building up in him as he glares at Roni. She... how can she still be with Hargrove? Last year she threatened Tommy when he tried to say some shit, but this guy from California rolls in and suddenly he's more important than the kid? "Why the hell is she still with him, then?" He growls out. "Did he threaten her? Is he hurting her?"

"No, no!" Dustin shakes his head at him, and the youngest Henderson looks totally afraid. "Damn it, shit, I promised I wouldn't say anything. The others don't know... I mean I... Shit. She can't know."

Steve falters and nearly drops the bucket of meat as he stares down at Dustin, watching the younger guy start to tear up. "Dustin, hey, why can't she know?"

"Because she's happy, man. I can't ruin that for her. Besides, Hargrove was just messing around. It was Halloween, after all. And I can't... she deserves to be happy. Even when the relationship ends, because it will, she shouldn't have one more person to distrust."

Steve shakes his head, any residual rage fading away. He'd have really lost it if Roni knew. That'd break his heart, too. "Man, you need to tell her. She needs to know. I'm not saying she should because it'd give me a chance with her." He clarifies, Dustin nodding and sniffing a bit. "Dustin, you're her little brother. You matter the most to her. You being safe makes her happy. Okay?"

"Fine." The kid nods. "I'll tell her, after we find Dart."

Steve nods, then laughs a little. "You know, I kind of forgot we were dealing with your interdimensional pet. You're a cool kid Henderson." Steve smiles as the youngest Henderson dimples once more, then nudges him. "C'mon, we've got shit to do." Dustin nudges him back but nods up at Steve, and the two boys start to catch up with their favorite girl. Steve occasionally looks down at the kid, and finally understands how Roni could be so protective of him. And hey, Dustin knows the secret to his legendary hair. That makes them buddies.

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*3rd Person POV (Steve)...*

It's strange, standing with Roni now and knowing how she really feels about him. Felt about him? It's easy and hard all at once. Steve's pretty sure it's just more frustrating, but at least he knows the truth.

After his talk with Dustin, the two sped up, not wanting Roni to be alone for much longer. Yeah, she can take care of herself and protect them without breaking a sweat, but she shouldn't have to. She's spent too long thinking she's alone, and that shit ends today.

The sun's moved further across the sky, the three companions having taken multiple breaks. They were mainly for Dustin, but Steve was feeling a burn in his legs, too. Roni probably could have kept going by sheer will, but they managed to feed her all the same.

Dustin's become more attached to him, too, and Steve would occasionally catch Roni watching them with pure joy in her eyes, before she'd harden once more and twirl her bow around.

Finally, after a few hours of walking, talking, awkward bathroom breaks, and eating, they'd made it to the junkyard. They pass by an abandoned building and Steve looks around, eyes zeroing in on the bus across the field. "Oh yeah. Yeah, this will do. This will do just fine." He comments, smirking when Roni laughs again, all bell-like and amused.

"I'm so glad you approve, Steven." She sasses, and he laughs before walking ahead of the siblings, adjusting his sunglasses as moves.

"Good call, dude." He calls back to Dustin, then figures he should probably throw around some more meat, just to be safe. He turns and walks backwards as he does so, Dustin copying him. Steve stops moving when he notices Roni's standing still, look around with a blank expression. "Henderson, you get started gathering some scraps." Steve nods towards the older Henderson and the younger understand instantly, mumbling a thanks on his way.

With a sigh, Steve sets down the bucket of remaining meat and removes his gloves, making sure the gross blood doesn't get on him. Which, like, yeah, he knows Roni is a hunter, but no sane person actually likes being covered in blood.

He carefully walks back towards her, but she remains unfocused, like she's somewhere else. God, he hopes she's just lost in a memory and not in the Upside Down. "Roni?" He finally asks, hands carefully reaching out towards her. She doesn't respond or look his way, so Steve becomes more confident. "Roni, hey. Come back. Come back to us." *To me.*

He gently places his left hand on hers, and wraps his right hand around her right shoulder. She still doesn't move, and her eyes are getting wet.

No, nope, not happening. If she cries, he's going to lose it. And by lose it, he means cry.

"Roni, you're in the junkyard." He offers, unsure of what to do. "You're with Dustin, and you're with me. You're here, not there. Not really. I don't know what you're seeing, but you are not alone. I'm never letting you be alone again, I promise." She shudders a bit, and Steve keeps going. "I'm always going to be sorry for our fights. The real ones, not our bantering. I'm sorry I made you cry, I'm sorry I made you feel like you were alone. I'm so sorry." She lets out a breath, but her eyes are still glazed. "When this is over, we're gonna have a long talk. You're my best friend, Roni, and I need you here. Dustin needs you here. So come back to us."

"Steve?" She whispers, blinking away unshed tears as her green eyes become brighter. He nods and stares down at her, resisting the urge to be sappy and kiss her forehead.

"Hey there, princess." It's the softest way he's ever called her that, and it feels nice to say it without being a dick.

"Steve." She whispers, then collapses into his chest, like it'd block out the world and he'd keep her safe.

Well, lucky for Roni, that's what he feels like doing all the time.

He removes his hands from her to instead pull the small girl into a hug. Without her heels, Steve feels like she's half his height. Seriously, his whole body wraps around her. And look, she's no stick - she's skinnier now because of the weight she's lost, but she still has

her curves and muscles. She's like a... she's like Tinkerbell if the pixie was a human? Man, he doesn't know. His point is, Roni always seems bigger because of how she carries herself, so whenever he holds her, he remembers just how tiny she really is.

"You're okay." She nods into his chest. "Where were you?"

"I... it wasn't the Upside Down." Roni whispers, voice ringing with honesty. "I was here last year, with Hopper. We, uh, we came to save the kids. I knocked out a Lab agent, and another one pointed a gun at me. I shot him with an arrow, but... I guess after the Upside Down I thought the Demogorgon was more traumatizing. Being here... I realized I could have been killed, again. That's, like, the tenth time I could have died."

Steve holds in his urge to get angry. Not at her, but for her. He doesn't want to keep thinking about how many times he could have lost her, honest to God lost her. "I'm sorry." He finally settles on. "I'm sorry you have to come back here."

"It's okay."

"No, it's not. None of this is okay. I'm sorry you have to keep being brave."

She pulls away and looks up at him, her green eyes full of understanding. He always had to explain himself to Nancy, but with Roni? Damn, she gets him. "If being brave means protecting Dustin and you, I'm okay with that."

"You're amazing, you know that?" Steve asks her, his heart fluttering.

She looks up at him and smiles, all warm and breathtaking. She... it's like her dad never pulled what he did. It's like she never became ice or pretended to be fire. This is who she is, the real Veronica. He's lucky enough to have seen it a few times over the years, catching her slipping up around Jonathan and then Nancy and Barb.

Seeing it up close, though? Man, he's about to turn into one of those dudes from Shakespeare or whatever. He has this sudden urge to just wax poetic about her, and never has he been more embarrassed than

right now.

"Oh. Thank you." Her eyes flick away from his and he knows she's looking for her little brother. She lets out a breath when she sees him, and then Steve goes breathless once more. Roni's smiling up at him, again, and she playfully kicks at his shin with her left foot. "Come on. We can't leave Dustin on his own for too long, he may get distracted by a strange bug." She laughs at the thought and jogs towards her brother, leaving Steve to watch her with pure joy radiating through him. His eyes flick up to the sun, and he frowns when he sees it's reached the point just before sunset. Damn these shorter days.

He jogs back over to his bucket and gloves and picks them up, rejoining the Henderson siblings. While Roni looks around, Dustin helps Steve make piles of the remaining meat. As they flip over the last of the red chunks, a familiar voice yells out, "I said medium-well!"

Steve looks up, eyes narrowing on the black kid and the redhead next to him. Lucas Sinclair and some random girl.

As the two approach, Steve notices Roni walking towards them. He looks down at Dustin. "Who's that?" He asks the younger male, but Dustin remains quiet and Steve can recognize the look on his face as heartbreak.

Oh, this is the girl.

"Max, what are you doing here?" Steve hears Roni exclaim, and he watches as she reaches the newcomers, first hugging Lucas and then talking to the girl. The redhead glances at Steve and Dustin from around the other girl. Her focus lands on Steve before returning to the girl her exact height - something he would have teased Roni for at the right moment - and nods along.

Steve smiles as Max trails after Roni, and the closer the girls get the easier he can make out the awe on the younger girl's face, especially when directed towards the bow. There's also disbelief there, but judging from the fact Sinclair probably spilled everything Steve just assumes her doubt stems from, well, everywhere. He remembers his own denial from last year, so he ain't judging the newbie.

"Steve, this Max. Max, this is Steve." Roni introduces the two, and the girl gives him a sarcastic little wave, her big blue eyes sparkling with the same kind of mischief in Roni's.

"And how do you two know each other?"

"I'm dating her stepbrother."

"She's dating my stepbrother." They answer together, then exchange matching amused grins.

"Huh. Okay. So, uh... We should start getting the bus ready. Yeah." He clears his throat, forcing himself to stop looking at Roni. Looking at Max is no better, because she seems to be reading his situation a little too clearly. She'll probably blab to Hargrove, and then Steve is royally screwed.

As the two girls start moving pieces of scrap around - Roni having set her bag and bow down inside the bus, Steve looks around in confusion, not hearing the two teenage boys who were supposed to be helping them.

He walks away from the girls, until he comes across two voices behind a beat up old red car. Grabbing a rusty old collapsible chair, he sneaks up behind them like a ninja and bangs it against the trunk of the busted car. "Hey! Dickheads! How come the only people helping me out is this random girl and Roni? We lose light in 40 minutes. Let's go. Let's go I said!" He tosses the chair aside and walks away, smirking when he hears the two kids griping behind him.

"Alright, asshole! God!" Dustin yelps.

"Okay! Stupid." Sinclair agrees.

So why is he smirking instead of telling them off?

Well, they're loud, and their voices carry. Which means Roni heard them, so there's a 50/50 chance she'll take care of it.

And she does, because she's amazing, and usually has his back unless he's acting like a *complete* douchebag.



"Hey, you two. Yeah, you. My hands are fucked and I need them more than you two dipshits need yours." She holds up her bandaged limbs, and guilt floods through Steve until she winks at him with a devilish grin. He snorts and winks back.

"Leia, you're on his side?" Dustin whimpers, looking all offended.

Sinclair nods, a hurt look flashing over his face. "Unbelievable, you think you know a girl."

Roni flashes them a warm smile, and while it certainly almost knocks Steve on his ass, he's got this feeling the boys are used to it. They grin back and she rolls her eyes. "Please, you guys know I love you. But Steve's got a delicate ego on a good day, so let's bring the insults down a notch."

Steve gapes at her, ignoring how the boys and Max instantly break into laughter before getting back to work. He pouts childishly at Roni, hoping she'll take the bait.

Her eyes soften and she smiles at him again. "C'mon, Steven. We've got work to do, and it'll go a lot slower if you just stand there pouting. We need some muscles in this operation, and Max and I are tired of all the heavy lifting." She pats his chest affectionately and rejoins the kids, leaving Steve alone for just a second with the ghost of her touch.

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*Veronica's POV...*

Steve sits with his back against the bus, flicking his zippo while in deep thought. My brother paces while I stand at the base of the ladder, having helped Lucas up so he can be on look out. Max is sitting behind me, impatient.

The sun set fully an hour ago, and the five of us have spent that time barricaded inside the bus. I spent the first half hour sharpening my arrowheads some more, adjusting the gears on my bow and making sure the string was ready for possible heavy use. I did go a little crazy with it on Thursday.

My hands ache a bit, but they're way less irritated than the day before. That probably won't last. Oh well.

It's been a weird day. My mind's still half on Will, Joyce, Mike, and Hopper. The only logical places for them to be are the hospital or the lab, but that discovery will have to be made after we capture and kill Dart.

Jesus, Dusty's going to have to mow every lawn in Hawkins to afford a new cat for mom. And it's no secret that Mews and I hated each other, but there was some mutual affection there, too. Besides, Mews helped mom after the divorce. She didn't deserve to get eaten by an interdimensional monster. She deserved to die years down the line, fat from my mom spoiling her, happy and calm and ready.

"So you two really fought one of these things before?" Max breaks the silence, and I turn a little to look down at her, nodding. She purses her lips and her eyes flicker to my bow and quiver. "And you're, like, the Green Arrow?"

"More like Robin Hood. I'm the original." She snorts in disbelief, and I smile. "I know, I know. I've been doing archery since I was eight, though. Our dad would take me hunting." My eyes flick over to Dustin as he paces nervously, but he doesn't seem to register that I'm talking.

"And you're good?"

"Max," We both look down at Steve, and he smiles at the younger girl, "Roni's the best."

I bite my lip and hold down my urge to blush before turning back to Max. She glances up at me, tilting her head and just reading me like the first time we met.

"Alright. So you fought one. And you're, like, totally, 100% sure it wasn't a bear?"

"Shit, don't be an idiot. Okay? It wasn't a bear." Dustin glares at her, and I jump a little at his animosity. Max looks affronted, her eyebrows was in a way so dangerously similar to mine. "Why are you

even here if you don't believe us? Just go home." He turns away from her and resumes pacing.

She just scoffs and stands up, climbing up the ladder without brushing me out of the way. "Geesh, someone's cranky. Past your bedtime?" She asks before disappearing onto the roof.

"That's good." I look away from Dustin pacing beside me to focus confusedly on Steve. "Just show her you don't care."

What?

"I don't." Dustin gripes at him. Steve winks his way. "Why are you winking, Steve? Stop."

Oh. Oh, God. Damn it.

"Did you seriously tell my brother to pretend he doesn't like her?" I whisper angrily to the older teen. He stops flicking his zippo and throws a guilty, apologetic look my way. "Steven."

"What, it's good advice."

"Yeah, sure." I roll my eyes and hold out my arm, stopping Dustin from his pacing. "Girls don't like having their emotions toyed with - well, most don't. The desperate ones don't care, and Max isn't desperate." Dustin narrows his eyes at me. "Girls like when guys tell the truth." My eyes flick over to Steve, who's watching us both, and it's like I'm talking to him. Like I'm venting about him *to him*, wishing he'd cared enough about me to pretend like I didn't mean anything to him all those years, instead of his annoyance towards me being real. "We like it when we know someone actually cares about us enough to tell the truth. To be upfront about how they feel without it being suffocating. There's a point between lying and being completely honest, and that's where guys - and girls - should operate."

"Did Billy tell you the truth?" Dustin asks me, but I'm still looking at Steve.

"Yeah. But he's also pretty easy to read. I guess I liked that there weren't any games between us. We felt the chemistry when we met, and we acted on it. It's been working out so far." I look over at my

brother. "Stop being a dick to Max."

"Yeah, well, being nice didn't work either." He mutters and paces away. I stare after him sadly, before sighing and climbing up the ladder, just to keep an eye out on the other two middle schoolers. Steve just sits in silence, playing with his lighter.

When I hear Max talking, though, I don't go up all the way. Instead I sit on one of the steps, in perfect range to eavesdrop.

"And it was my fault, I guess. Why we left. I was hanging out with my dad behind my mom and Neil's back. Then one day Billy pissed me off - he actually wasn't doing anything other than being an irritating older brother, like he's supposed to be - and I don't have a filter when I get mad, so I told his dad that I'd caught him with a girl when he was supposed to be picking me up from the skate park. So he told on me, and Neil exploded and my mom cried and we moved away from my dad, to get a fresh start. Like he was the problem. And things are just... worse now. My stepbrother's always been a dick, but now he's just angry... all the time. And..." I hear her sniffing and the nerves in my body tell me to go up there and comfort her, and the thought about caring for another lost girl makes me miss El all the more. "Well, he can't take it out on my mom, so..."

"He takes it out on you." Lucas finishes, voice soft.

I frown, biting my lip and lowering my eyebrows. Well, let's add that to the list of things to take care of. "Yeah. I mean, he's better when he's with Veronica. Nicer. His old self, I guess. He smiles and he cares about her, and I wish he could be with her all the time, especially since it means... it means things go back to what they were like before, when we were in California and happy." I look down at my hands, heart breaking for the stepsiblings... *siblings*. "I don't know why I'm telling you all this." Max snorts, and I can hear her shifting around. "It's just... I know that I can be a jerk like him sometimes, and I do not want to be like him. Ever. I guess I'm angry, too, and... I'm sorry." She laughs shakily. "Jesus, what's wrong with me?"

"Hey, you're nothing like your brother, okay? You're cool and different. And you're super smart. And you're, like, totally tubular." Max laugh brings down my anxiety, until there's an itching under my

skin and I have to clutch onto the ladder, my mind flooded with a now-memory.

*Sleek dogs run over winding vines, paws pounding on the grounds of the tunnels. They follow the twists and turns, run hard and fast. They're coming, coming...*

"They're coming!" I shout, nearly falling off the ladder as I leave my now-memory. Dustin catches me, though, and I turn, crashing into Steve. He looks at me in concern.

"Hey, is she okay?" Max yells down, but my focus is still on Steve as he holds me up, and my voice is so soft I can barely hear myself speaking, body tensing in fear.

"I saw them. They're here. It's not just Dart. Okay? He isn't alone. I-I don't know how many."

"We haven't heard -" Steve is interrupted by one very loud, long growl. We both stumble, reaching the window and peering through gaps in the rough barricade. Dustin joins us, and we all look out into the fog, searching for the monsters.

"You see him?" Dustin asks.

Steve shakes his head. "No."

"Lucas, what's going on?" I yell up, having found my voice.

"Hold on!" He shouts down. I nod despite him being unable to see me, Steve pressing in behind me a bit to keep looking out the window. "I've got eyes! Ten o'clock! T-ten o'clock!" Lucas stutters out, yelling down at us.

My eyes flick to ten o'clock, finding it just before Steve does. "Right there." I point to the spot with Steve, watching in horror as a beast just like the one I'd seen in the Upside Down last year - the flowerhead dog - sniffs at the meat.

"What's he doing?"

"I don't know." Steve whispers back to my brother. "He's not taking

the bait. Why is he not taking the bait?"

I feel eyes on me and turn my head to look over my shoulder, meeting Steve's desperate gaze. "You guys left nearly two bucketfuls of meat for him."

"Maybe he's not hungry." Dustin offers.

I bite my lip and stare out the window. "No. He's bored. He's tired of eating bait. Maybe he wants the real prey?" I suggest.

Oh, fuck.

I feel someone shifting behind me and turn completely to see Steve walking away. He pulls his nail-bat out of his backpack. "Steve? Steve, what are you doing?" My little brother asks. Steve just slouches a little, looking more serious and resolved than I've ever seen him. He tosses his light at Dustin, who fumbles and catches it.

"Just get ready."

I watch in horror as he turns to leave the bus, and chase after him. "No, Steve, come on. Don't be a hero."

"Why? Because I'm not one?" He asks me, hurt in his eyes.

I shake my head vehemently and grab his elbows. "No. Because heroes die, and I can't lose you."

"Yeah, well, I can't lose you either. We don't have time for this." He scoffs and tries to step away, but I hold on tighter. "Jesus, Roni."

"No, listen. Please don't go out there. Please."

"I have to Veronica." He bites his lip before giving me a sad smile. "Hey, I'll be fine. I've got my bat. This ain't my first rodeo. You need to be here to watch the kids." Before I can stop him he manages to escape my grip and walk out the bus. The metal creaks as Dustin closes the door behind him.

Screw letting Steve go out there without back up. I grab my bow and readjust my full quiver before climbing up the ladder, dropping the

jacket I'd briefly pulled back onto the ground of the bus. Lucas looks up at me, hands wrapped around his binoculars, but my focus settles on a nervous and confused Max. "Go downstairs." I order, but not unkindly. She nods at my tone and brushes past me, warily peeking down at my clenched bow on her way. "You're my eyes until it gets too dangerous, understood? Then you're the first one to go back in."

"But I -"

"Not a discussion." I tell him, slipping into Huntress mode. He gives me a nod of confirmation. "Keeping you three and Steve alive is my first priority. Understood?"

"You got it, Huntress."

"Good. Keep an eye out on the edges of the junkyard. There's more coming."

"How do you know?"

Oh. That's what I forgot to do. "I'll tell you later. I promise." He purses his lips but nods again, looking through his binoculars. I step a little away from him and notch my first arrow, watching as Steve swings his bat below us.

He starts to whistle, egging on the creatures. *It isn't just Dart.* "Come on, buddy." He continues whistling. The further away he gets, the less we hear him, and the harder it is to see him through the rolling fog. My fingers itch to draw the string, but I can't be too early with it. He keeps on swinging, until the beast emerges once more. I shift my weight and raise my arms, drawing back the string as I aim.

Then I feel it again, this pulsing in my veins and the back of my neck erupting in goosebumps, my Spidey-Senses tingling in warning.

"Steve, watch out!" Lucas yells. "Three o'clock, Veronica, three o'clock." He tells me.

Meanwhile, Steve is busy yelling up at him, focus still on the first beast. "A little busy here!"

"Three o'clock, three o-"

"I have it!" I shout instead, aiming where the pulsing grows strongest and watching as my first arrow hits its mark, the second best crashing to the ground with a screech of pain. I feel more coming and focus on Steve, who stares up at me in shock before backing away from the other creature. "Move your ass, Harrington! We've got company!" I shout.

Suddenly the first creature makes a mad dash for him, my arrow just grazing its side. Still, it keeps going. Another one flies out of nowhere and Steve rolls over the hood of a car.

"Go down." I order Lucas, hearing him rush back to relative safety as I notch another arrow and release it.

Bullseye. The third party-crasher goes down as Steve lunges, arches his back, and bats the first monster clear across the junkyard. Damn.

I vaguely hear my brother yelling for Steve, but choose to focus on protecting the retreating older teen instead. I've been training for this potential moment all year, and while I'm very afraid, protecting the others is way more important. So I act instinctively, relying on muscle memory. One arrow, two arrows, seven arrows.

There's a total of six creatures in the end. Four have collapsed, not rising, bodies littered with enough arrows to take out ten men. These little bastards have thick skin.

Now, I focus on the last two. The first has one long yellow stripe down its back, the other just dark. They're fast, and way more interested in getting in the bus than on it, so I grab the rope and lace it around the top of the ladder and tie it around my waist so there's something keeping me tethered to the roof. I peer over and shoot, getting lucky when the second creature is knocked in the path of my arrow. I release another one seconds after, right in its neck. It pierces with a gross, violent sound, the monster collapsing with a whimper.

But the first one - the creature with the yellow stripe - is still going. He's fast, and I can see him getting ready to pounce up on the roof. Dustin's voice crackles loudly on my walkie, shouting for anyone - hell, for God - and it's all just too loud. Especially when the last one standing is screaming in the night, repeatedly banging its body



against the bus and jostling it dangerously. I quickly pull out my knife and cut through the rope, releasing me just as the monster jumps. I manage to hit it out of the way with my bow before rushing down the ladder, a little out of breath thanks to the adrenaline still coursing through my veins.

I'm not gonna lie, it felt awesome doing that.

"Are you okay? Roni?!" Steve yells, rushing over to me. I feel hands on my back and focus on Max as she pulls me away from the ladder.

Just then, something heavy lands on the roof. Before I can draw an arrow in defense, Max is holding onto me and screaming, the dog-like beast open up his flowerhead and screeching down at us. "Out of the way, out of the way!" Steve shouts, knocking me out of Max's grasp and into my brothers as he thrusts his nail-bat up. "You want some? Come get this!" He screams up.

The monster screeches again before suddenly stopping, gazing out towards the horizon. A second later it's jumping and running away, but the back of my neck is still tingling. I feel danger, still, but it's... it's distant. Like if you were watching a forest fire from a safe place.

I rush out the bus, hand still clenched around my bow. Steve follows me, walking a little ahead with his free arm stretched out to keep me back. Safe. I look around, eyes on the unmoving monsters. I can't feel them anymore, can't feel any immediate danger. Still, I walk away from Steve and pull out my knife, slashing each and everyone one of the beasts' throats and barely grimacing as they bleed out their thick goo.

"What. Happened?" Lucas finally asks.

"I don't know." Max mutters, and I look over at the kids from my position, metal on the edge of my knife glistening with monster blood. They stare back at me, eyes wide with awe.

"Maybe Leia and Steve scared 'em off?" Dustin suggests.

"No." We all look over at Steve, who shakes his head, hair even bigger than before thanks to all that action. "No way." He turns to look at us.

"They're going somewhere."

*Oh my God. Will.*

## 16. The Mind Flayer

Hi all, and welcome to my *Stranger Things* Steve Harrington/OC story! It's been a long, long time coming. Seriously. Since 2017 long.

In this story, we've got the Ice Queen of Hawkins, the older-but-shorter-by-season 2 sister of Dustin Henderson, because he deserves an older sibling. She's Veronica, and even though *Heathers* came out in 1989 I've taken the liberty of borrowing some of my favorite quotes because *Winona Ryder Easter Eggs*. Seriously, I cannot overstate my love for that movie. Anyway, there's more of a backstory for the Henderson family, including adding the dad to the "asshole fathers club", co-president with Lonnie Byers, the prick. Expect explicit language because, hello, *Stranger Things* isn't known for censoring language.

This is probably the longest chapter I've written for this story (so far). It's got canon, it's got a beloved character's death. There's drama, a fight between two best friends that gets resolved but someone's still a little in the proverbial dog house. Everyone learns Veronica's secret, so that's fun. We get another Steve POV scene, and he and Nancy get the closure lacking in the show. There's maturity, forgiveness, understanding - it's the breakup they deserved but never received. Hopper and Veronica finally reunite - side note, their relationship does in no way, shape, or form take away from Hopper and Eleven's. Remember, the former two have known each other for a lot longer, so the history is there. Steve and Veronica are cute, Veronica remains oblivious like the not-so-sweet summer child she is, and the kids have faith in their Huntress. She also finally mentions Billy again, so my bad for making it in passing and not a big thing, but she's been pretty distracted so let's forgive Veronica for this one.

Oh, and remember when I said her powers weren't going to be like Will's? Yeah, don't worry, I stuck with that notion. I've pretty much fully evolved her "mutation" though and the scene itself is pretty cool. I'm not saying I'm proud of myself, but I'm

proud of myself. She learns some stuff about why she was chosen, which was fun to write because I didn't know I was going to write it until I did. My mind went there, so naturally I followed.

And man, this is the calm before the storm. The next chapter will hopefully be long, but a lot will happen. Again, I'm sticking pretty close to canon, so you know what's coming next. It'll most likely be updated tomorrow night, possibly Saturday depending on how long it takes to write.

Enjoy the story! I only own Veronica.

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The smell of burning flesh still fills my nostrils as we retrace our steps on the train tracks. It'll be a tight fit in Steve's car, but he promised to drop me off at the hospital first and see if Hopper and the others are there. If not, the Lab has them. But we had to take care of something, first.

It wasn't like we could just bury the monsters - someone would only find them, and then we'd be in for a world of trouble. So Steve and I put the recently departed into one pile and safely set up a pit. Then the five of us watched them burn down to nothing more than crispy, charred bones. A few slams of some scrap metal later, they were nothing but ash and small bits of unidentified animal nature and weather would dispose of.

I walk behind Steve and next to Max, curiosity clawing at me, needing to know just what she meant when she was talking to Lucas. How does Billy take it out on her? Is he... is he physical? I just... I don't know what's going on, and I hate not knowing. On top of that, there are still goosebumps at the back of my neck, there's still that itching under my skin that comes with danger, *danger Will Robinson*.

Dustin and Lucas lead us, the former asking more questions about Dart, until he finally asks, "And you're positive that was him?"

Dustin, ever the impatient kid, sighs. "Yes. He had the same exact yellow pattern on his butt."

"It's true, I saw it." I pitch in, backing my brother up.

"He was tiny two days ago." Max comments.

"Well, he's molted three times already." Gross.

"MalTED?" Steve asks, and I smile softly.

"MolTED."

"*MolTED*, Steven." Dustin and I correct, but I'm more affectionate about it. Steve turns his head to look back at me, and there's a hint of red in his cheeks visible from our flashlights. Probably just embarrassed he mixed up the word, which really isn't anything to be embarrassed over. Shit like that is a common mistake.

"Shed his skin to make room for growth, like hornworms." Dustin further explains, and I wrinkle my nose. Just because I hunt, doesn't mean I can't get a little grossed out.

"When's he gonna molt again?" Max asks, giving me a nervous look. I flash a smile in return, hoping it conveys some confidence of the situation. I am sort of riding a high here - I killed five monsters on my own, without getting slashed at or bitten or thrown into another wall. And yeah, my hands definitely itch, but it was totally worth it.

Dustin waits a moment before responding. "It's gotta be soon. When he does, he'll be fully grown or close to it. And so will his friends."

"Great. Awesome. Next time, just ask for a dog like the rest of us." I gripe almost good-naturedly at him.

I don't have to see him to know he's rolling his eyes.

"Yeah, and he's gonna eat a lot more than just cats." Aw, shit Steve.

"Wait, a cat?" Lucas stops Dustin in his tracks, forcing the rest of us to stop as well. "Dart ate a cat?!" Lucas demands an answer, shoving at my brother. I push in between Steve and Max to stand between the two boys, leveling the tallest of the friends with a glare.

"No, what? No." Dustin shakes his head, lying horribly.

Well, the truth almost always comes out. "What are you talking about? He ate Mews." Steve reminds my little brother, having not gotten the memo to keep it between the three of us. Look, I'm not saying Dustin should lie to his friends, but I know Lucas really well. He doesn't do well with the truth if it comes from anyone but the person hiding it. And as much as I lo... Steve is pretty blunt when it comes to honesty.

"Mews? Who's Mews?" Max asks.

"Dustin's and Roni's cat."

"My mom's cat." I correct, though I'm nervously looking between the two boys.

"Steve!"

"I knew it!" Lucas shoves Dustin, so I block my little brother and hold out my hands to keep the Sinclair boy back. He falters a bit but nevertheless glares over my shoulder. "You kept him!" Lucas accuses.

"No! No, no I... he missed me. He wanted to come home.

"Bullshit!" Lucas shouts back, and I'm a little inclined to agree seeing as how Dustin told me the truth.

"I didn't know he was a demogorgon, okay!"

"Oh, so now you admit?"

"Guys, who cares? We have to go!" Max cuts in, and I nod agreement.

"I care!" Lucas yells, and Max jumps a bit. "You put the part in jeopardy! You broke the law!"

"So did you!" Dustin shouts back, before I can diffuse the situation.

"What?"

Dustin spins and points his flashlight in Max's face, throwing her a little off balance. "You told a stranger the truth!"

She scoffs. "A stranger?!"

"Dustin, Lucas, enough!" I order, hands thrusting out and placed on their chests. "Seriously. We have to keep moving!"

"He wanted to tell her, too!" Lucas shouts at me, pointing at my little brother.

"But I *didn't*, Lucas, okay?"

In the distance, a monster screeches, and my whole body begins to tingle. Or maybe I just stop trying to hold it down and give in.

With a blink, I'm back in the Upside Down. I crouch down and reach for some leaves, and when I pick them up I know I'm not astral projecting. I'm here, and back there, walking in two worlds at once.

I stand up and look around, but as always I'm alone.

My nerves still sing, but I don't feel like I'm in trouble. But someone's in danger. Big danger.

I step off the tracks, walking towards a thick tree line with squiggling vines, all of which slither out of my way like thousands of bewitched snakes.

Creatures skitter around me, moving away the further into the blue woods I get. The tiny white particles responsible for what I'm seeing float around, landing on my skin like tiny melting snowflakes. Or thick dandruff.

Well, I wasn't alone before the switch. So wherever I'm going, someone's following me. I can't hear or see them, but I feel it. Like, the other times, there's been this void in my chest reminding me I was alone.

I keep moving until I reach a clearing on the edge of the woods, overlooking Hawkins. My whole body freezes in anxiety when I see just what was waiting for me.

The Mind Flayer looms above Hawkins Lab, the lights in the building flickering and vines creeping all around it. Monstrous dogs screech

louder, the Flayer roaring like the alpha of a wolf pack, calling his betas home. His tear-shaped head is bowed down, focus entirely on the lab. Just like before Thursday, the shadow monster ignores me. I'm not even on his radar, I won't allow myself to be on his radar. Every nerve in my body still tingles and sings out danger, like a canary dying in a toxic mine.

Will said he was one with the Flayer, right? So if the shadow monster is down there...

Sudden hands on my shoulder shock me out of it, and I turn my head to blink up at a relieved Steve. "Jesus, Roni." I let out a breath, and his brows furrow. "You were there, right? Not, uh -"

"Astral projecting." Dustin finishes for him, and I look up at my younger brother. His blue eyes shine with resolve.

"Yes. I was there." I murmur, then look over at a scared Max and very confused Lucas. "The Lab. The Mind Flayer is at the Lab."

I point behind me and the other four focus on the darkened building below. Lucas pulls up his binoculars and Steve bends down to pick up his dropped flashlight. "She was right." Lucas lowers his binoculars. "They were going back home." His head swivels towards me, so sharply I'm afraid he gave himself whiplash. "How did you know? What happened? No more lies."

"I wasn't lying about anything, Lucas." I growl at him.

"A lie of omission is still a lie." He wisely announces, and I roll my eyes.

"I'll tell you on the way. We have to go." I brush past him and start on the trail towards the Lab, flicking my flashlight back on.

---

"So you've been having this 'now-memories' all year, but thought they were just PTSD episodes?" Lucas asks me as keep walking, Max standing beside me and occasionally making small noises.

Explaining what's been going on with me to the two younger twins was surprisingly easy. Maybe because Lucas is usually the chilliest



member of the party, and Max doesn't know me as well as the others do. Telling Jonathan the truth will be hard, so at least I'm getting some "honesty practice" in.

"Yeah."

"Hopper, Joyce, and obviously Will knew about them."

"And the doctors at the Lab." I add without looking at him, concentrating on the dark path ahead.

"But why didn't you tell us?"

"Does my brother know?" They ask, and I look over at Max. We're the same height right now, so it's easy to look into her blue eyes.

I shake my head. "No. He doesn't know about any of this. All he knows is that I was kidnapped, that someone killed my friend, and that I have mandatory therapy."

"Oh." She whispers, tilting her head. "Your told him that?"

"Yes."

"Did he... Was he cruel? Rude about it?"

I narrow my eyes in confusion. "No. Why would he have been?"

She shakes her head, but her relaxed smile is anything but genuine. "No reason. I'm glad he was nice about it, though."

"Yeah."

"Or you would have shot him with a whole volley of arrows."

I smile at the awe in her voice, and affectionately hip check her. "I told you, there's not much to do in Hawkins, so you've gotta get creative."

"You're a badass. The way you took down those things was totally awesome."

I laugh. "Steve told you so."

"You're too cool to be with my stepbrother." She tells me, all serious-like. Then she pales and mutters something under her breath. Before I can ask for any kind of clarification, Lucas regains my attention.

"So why didn't you tell us?" He glares at me accusingly, but his voice is sad. Betrayed. *Oh*.

I stop walking and instantly pull him into a sisterly hug, arms wrapped around his neck to anchor him. "I thought I was losing my mind, Luke. Constantly. And you guys had gone through a lot, too. It was important to me that my shit stayed *my shit*. I didn't want to be a burden. You were all doing so well at moving on, I didn't want to be the thing holding you in the past."

"We could have helped you, Huntress. You've always had our back. Always. You have to know we have yours, too."

"I know, I'm sorry."

"Do-does Jonathan know?"

I shake my head. "No. But he will. Even if he hates me after, I'm going to tell him."

"Does he know about Will? What the... What the Mind Flayer did to him." I don't answer. "Okay."

"None of this is okay." I gently tell him, voice barely a whisper. He nods and we break apart, realizing the other three kept on moving. Steve turns back around occasionally, and when our eyes meet I feel safe.

"No. But it will be."

"When did you get so smart?" I ask him, and he blushes a bit before walking ahead. With an affection shake of my head I follow after him, closer to the danger.

Voices ahead stop me in my tracks, so familiar. "Hello?" Our group fumbles a bit, but Steve is the first one to charge ahead. I bring up the rear as we keep moving, arrow notched as a precaution. "Who's there? Who's there?"

The last to exit the woods and reach the clearing, I falter once more when I see Nancy and Jonathan standing by the closed Hawkin Lab gate. "Jonathan!" I shout, rushing forward.

"Ver?"

"Steve?" Jonathan and Nancy ask in disbelief, but the former still catches me in a warm hug when I reach him.

"Nancy, Jonathan." Steve responds, joined by my brother.

"What are you guys doing here?"

"What are you doing here?" Steve asks his ex in return.

She looks at me, worriedly. "We're looking for Mike and Will."

"What happened to your hands?" Jonathan asks me, holding up one wrapped limb.

"Archery on Thursday. I... I have to tell -"

"They're not in there, are they?" Dustin speaks over me, nodding his head towards the dark Lab.

"We're not sure." Jonathan answers, then looks at me in confusion. "What's going on?"

"Monsters. Johnny, Nance, they're back. And... I figured it out. What I could do."

She gasps and rushes over to me, hands on my elbows. "Your visions. You figured out your visions?"

"Now-memories. Will said they were -"

"What the hell are you two talking about?" Jonathan asks me, and I pale a bit. "Ver, what's going on? Where's my brother? Where's my mom and Mike?"

"I..." I trail off, head snapping in the direction of the Lab. *Danger, Danger, Danger. Run, Run, Run.* "The-they're in there. I know it."

"How -" Loud screeching cuts him off. After a few moments of listening to the monsters, two hands turn me around and I'm forced to look into scared and angry brown eyes. "Veronica. What is going on?" Jonathan shakes me a bit, and I feel like my body's in shock. "What didn't you tell me?"

"Lay off her, man!" Steve shouts, attempting to pry me away from my other brother.

"What's going on?!" Jonathan screams in my face.

"I-I... I'm sorry." I whisper, all my fears of being a disappointment coming to fruition. Jonathan stares at me blankly, like he doesn't even know what he's looking at. "I... I wanted to tell you. B-but your mom... I shouldn't have listened to her. And I... I didn't know how to tell you. I didn't know where you were, when I learned wh-what was actually happening."

"Veronica, what are you talking about?"

"An-and he has him. Bu-but he didn't want me. I wish he wanted me. Then he-he'd be sa-safe. Should have, I should have..." My whole body is vibrating, on edge from the fear of what my mind is keeping my out of and complete heartbreak for Jonathan.

I deserve this, though. Whatever happens, I deserve.

"Liar. Liar. Liar." I mumble, feeling like I'm in a free fall.

"Who's a liar?" Jonathan asks, still shaking me with tears of desperation in his eyes.

"That's enough!" Nancy shouts, and her soft hands pull me into her. We twist so my back is to my best friend. "Now isn't the time. We have to get in there!"

"I'm on it!" Dustin calls back, and I hear him moving. A second pair of footsteps join him, and I look up to see Jonathan following him.

I breathe out a sigh of relief before my gaze returns to Nancy. "You guys... Did you do it?"

She blushes. "Yeah, it was good. He's, uh... Was that his first time? 'Cause it was -"

"His first time exposing a secret government program?" I ask, eyebrow raised in confusion. She blinks down at me, then blushes harder. My eyes narrow, then I start to laugh. It's hysterical, of course, because I have no control over my emotions right now. "Oh my God, no way!"

Nancy groans and looks away, gently stroking my back to remind me to take deep breaths. I concentrate on how happy she looks, how sure she is despite the situation. There's a calmness to her I'd only really seen last year on the Byers couch, when Jonathan was wrapping her hand.

I look over at Steve, expecting him to be focused on his ex. *Heartbroken.*

But he's just looking at me, big eyes worried. Occasionally they flick over my shoulder at the security booth. I can hear my brother and Jonathan in there, arguing loudly. Steve's eyes are full of anger every time he glances their way, and I bite my lip.

Nancy keeps stroking my back, and picks up my left hand to look over the gauze. It's totally unsanitary now - monster goo has dried in gross green-black patches, and a little red has slipped through since my blisters didn't heal before I went all "Robin Hood" on those creatures. "We have to clean this as soon as possible." She mutters in a distracted tone. I just nod, then jump when we're flooded with lights. I turn and look up at the Lab, the power back on. A second later I'm pulled by Nancy to the booth, the rest of our group chasing after us.

Jonathan keeps slamming on the button, but nothing happens. "Let me try." My brother demands, shoving the older male out of the way.

"Hang on -"

"Let me try, Jonathan!" I snort when Dustin manages to completely push Jonathan away from the controls, then shift my weight anxiously. No matter how hard he presses, the gate still won't open,

and even without my Spidey-Senses tingling I know something bad is going down in the Lab. "Son of a bitch, you know what -"

"D, the power just turned back on. That means the system's still reboot-"

"Veronica, we need to get in there!" Jonathan yells at me, and I jump at the volume.

With a click and a groan, the gate starts to slide open. "Hey, I got it!" Dustin cheers, laughing a bit. "I got it!"

I don't wait for anyone. I don't wait to make a plan or fucking vote.

I run. The minute the gap in the gate is wide enough I've taken off, subconsciously tossing my back in Steve's direction.

"Ver, wait!"

"Leia, what the hell!"

"RONI! Shit!" Jonathan, Dustin, and Steve shout behind me, but I just speed up, feet pounding on the hard concrete as I tear off towards the Lab.

The closer I get, the louder the screeching, until I finally reach the closest entrance - the one with the driveway. In the near distance I can hear a car roaring towards us.

Jonathan and Nancy, probably.

It doesn't matter. Mike's outside, standing behind Hopper who's carrying an unconscious Will over his shoulder.

"Hooligan, what -" Hopper's interrupted by Joyce's fearful scream. I dash around him with an arrow notched, entering the Lab just in time to see a monster digging its claws into a screaming Bob, flowerhead open.

"Hey, you ugly freak!" I shout, and the head turns to me. "Chew on this!" The arrow flies true, straight down the throat of the beast. It makes these awful gagging noises as it rolls off the bleeding man. I

dive towards Bob, ready to pull him to safety when three more beasts rush in, pouncing on the man before I can reach him. I scream and stagger, fumbling for an arrow and shooting it into the nearest one. It's too fast, though, ducking its head as it raises its claw. I aim for another, and another, but my hands are shaking too much and the nausea hits me like a freight train.

As I notch one more arrow, one strong arm lifts me around the middle. I scream with rage, nearly drowned out by Bob's shouts of pain. Tears are rolling down my cheeks as Joyce's own sobs tear through the night, the cool fall breeze sending shivers down my body as Hopper shoves the lab door closed, his free arm tugging at Mrs. Byers as she screams for Bob.

"He's gone! He's gone!" Hopper yells, and a horn honks behind us.

Through wet eyes I see Jonathan leaning out of his car's window. "Come on! Get in!" He orders, and I almost laugh at how Terminator it sounds.

Hopper releases me in favor of lifting Will back over his shoulder, relieving Mike of that duty. The youngest Wheeler chases after them, jumping in the backseat of the car with Joyce and the knocked-out kid.

There's no more room in the car, though, so Hopper practically lifts me in a dash to his own vehicle, sliding me onto the front bench before slamming the driver door, turning the engine on, and following Jonathan away from the lab and the shrieking hellhounds.

"Veronica, count down from 10, count down from 10!" He yells at me, and it takes a couple of gasps to zero in on how anxious my breathing is. How faded the already dark night is getting.

*Can't breathe, can't breathe, can't breathe.*

"Hooligan, I need you to breathe!"

*Can't breathe, can't breathe, can't breathe.*

Someone honks, but it's like I'm hearing it under water. Like I'm in a pool, holding my breath for as long as I can.

*Barbara died in a pool. She was probably killed like Bob.*

*Dead, dead, dead.*

Hands are pawing at my face and body, pulling me closer to the passenger door. I try to shake and shove the weight off, but nothing works. The hands are too strong.

The yelling seems to get louder - it's still muffled, but there's more of it.

Hands pull my face up, and suddenly I'm looking into a pair of very scared hazel eyes. Hazel, kind of like a forest, with brown tree trunks and green leaves.

*Home. Home, home, home.*

"Steve." I breathe out, and the older teen nods.

"Yeah, it's me princess. It's me. You're okay, you're okay. We need you to breathe, though."

"Can't." I gasp, feeling like I'm choking. Like I swallowed an arrow. Like the first beast that tore into Bob.

*Dead, dead, dead.*

"Hey, hey, Roni. You're going to be okay. Take a deep breath."

"Can't -"

"You can. Okay. I'll breathe with you." He breaths in through his nose, sharp and loud. I mimic him as best I can, but it comes out shaky. "Again, Roni." I nod and do as he says, releasing the air after a few seconds.

I don't know how long I breathe like that for, but once my nerves have calmed and the goosebumps have settled under my skin it's like the world exists again. "I'm fine. I'm okay. I'm good."

He nods with me and settles back, removing his hands from my face. I turn in my seat to see three kids staring back at me with wide eyes.



Dustin leaps forward in his seat, and arms are wrapped around my neck. "Oh my God, why would you run off like that?"

I don't answer him, I just hugged him back. It's an awkward position, but it grounds me. Still, my ears are filled with screams and my vision is painted red with blood.

I feel just as helpless as I did last year, when I tried to save Barb, when she was tugged out of my hold. I failed, again. I keep failing.

*Why do I keep failing?*

---

Back at the Byers house, the air is thick with tension. Joyce has holed herself in her room, Will is still unconscious, laid out on the couch with a cover drawn over him for some warmth. Hopper's been on the phone for nearly twenty minutes, calling every government number he knows. The kids are in the kitchen, sitting at the table and watching the Chief of Police tear into whoever's on the phone.

Jonathan's crouched by Will, running his hand through brown locks and whispering softly to his little brother. Nancy stands behind him, a comforting hand on his shoulder. Steve is watching them, occasionally pacing back and forth, always stopping in front of me and nonverbally checking in.

Finally Hopper hangs up, slamming the phone back in its cradle. I wince at the noise, grimacing more when I remember his haunting words, that he has no idea how many are still alive in the Lab, or what Dr. Owens' status is.

The Doc's still a government agent, but... he did help me. Even though he was studying me, he did help.

"They didn't believe you, did they?" My brother asks, and I turn my head towards the kitchen to look at him. Steve stops pacing and stands just behind me, a gentle hand wrapping around my left shoulder.

"We'll see."

"So 'no'." I whisper, and Steve squeeze a little tighter, the only person

who heard me.

"We'll see? We can't just sit here while those things are loose!" Mike shouts, and I nod in agreement.

"We stay here, and we wait for help." Hopper responds, voice strong and authoritative.

He walks away, briefly stopping to give me a comforting smile. I try to smile back, but all I see is him in the tunnels, surrounded by vines, alone because he had to go play hero.

Just like I did, at the Lab.

He keeps on walking in the direction of Joyce's room, and I let out another shaky breath.

"You okay?" Steve asks.

"Yes."

"Liar." He nudges at me, a soft smile on his face. I return the gesture.

"Veronica." I turn in the direction of the voice, paling a bit when I see Jonathan standing up, staring at me with a blank face. Still, even from here I can see his brown eyes are a mix of sad, terrified, and angry. He storms towards me, Nancy barely missing him as she attempts to grab his arms.

With a gasp I'm suddenly pressed against a wall in the living room, Steve reaching towards me but blocked by Jonathan's lithe body. His hands are on my shoulders, shoving me back, but I don't move.

"What didn't you tell me? What do you know?" I bite my lip. "Answer me!"

"Back off, man!" Dustin shouts, and I turn my head to see the four kids rushing towards us, Max's face conveying the most fear despite how little I really know her.

"No! No more lies, no more secrets! No more hiding shit from me!" Jonathan orders, glaring down at me.

I nod. "You're right. Okay? You're right. No more lies, no more secrets."

"Good. Now start. *Talking*."

"A-after I got back from the Upside Down, I was... I was different. Changed. But, not just from the trauma. I..." I trail off and stare at Nancy, her big blue eyes blinking away tears. "The air there. It's... it's not right. It's toxic, but also... its got particles that come from the creatures there. I... If I was only there for a few hours, I would've been okay. But I was there for four days." Jonathan's eyes widen as he keeps staring down at me. "And I guess I showed enough... enough fight. Or something. Because the particles... they chose me. My DNA changed because of it, mutating me into someone who's a part of the Upside Down without having to be there. But it's, it's weird. I can't feel their pain. Or what they feel. I still don't really know how it works exactly, and I don't think I ever will. I'm, I'm learning as I go."

"How long has this been going on? What does it have to do with Will?" Jonathan demands.

"Let go of her, man, can't you see she's scared enough as it is?" Steve orders, tugging at the other teen's hands.

"She should be scared! People are dead and something happened to Will, and she knows about it!"

"So do I!" Mike screams at the older male, whose head turns sharply at the declaration. "It was the Mind Flayer, okay! He's inside Will! It's not Veronica's fault, none of this is her fault, so get away from her!"

"It doesn't matter who's fault it is!" Jonathan roars back, his focus on me once more. "This is about you keeping shit to yourself for *months*, and not telling me!" He glares harder. "What else have you been hiding?"

"I can see the Upside Down. I keep seeing it. I can astral project myself, or sometimes I'm physically there, walking in both worlds." I whisper, voice shaky as I explain. "I... at first, I thought they were PTSD episodes. Hallucinations. Like Will. But after... after Halloween,

and then Thursday, we found out they were something more." He narrows his eyes. "Will was found with a vine shoved down his throat. He was chosen, too. It wasn't like with me, where I was just breathing it all in and not giving anything back. The Upside Down managed to get his DNA in return, not just anything we breathed out. Saliva, enough samples to *know* him. And on Thursday, he... the Mind Flayer went in him. It also... found me. I let it find me, I guess, my meds have been making my mutation a little less easy to understand and control. Um, anyway..." I blink and look down, my eyes closing tight. "These vines, they grabbed me and they pulled me down onto the ground. They wrapped around my wrists and ankles and bound me there while this shadow-tornado swirled around me, trying to get me to submit. Then it vanished, but I was still in the Upside Down. So I walked and kept walking, finally reaching your house. Joyce, she snapped me out of it. And Will and I... we told her the truth." I open my eyes and stare back up at my oldest friend. "I wanted to tell you. I wanted to, really, but your mom... your mom said not to, and I didn't know where you were. I didn't know if you and Nance already left to find Murray, or if you were caught by someone, or if you were still in Hawkins. And my hands were all torn up and my body hurt and I was scared. I'm always scared." I whisper to him, only to him. "That's my biggest secret."

Jonathan steps away from me, then shakes his head. "You should've told me." Is all he says before walking towards the back door, Nancy rushing after him like a bat out of hell.

I nearly collapse to my knees, exhausted and terrified I lost my best friend, of the knowledge I'd disappointed him. Mike and Lucas are closest, and they catch me. But it's Max who flutters around me like some worried butterfly, shoving me and the boys towards the kitchen and forcing me to sit down. "Steve, Mike, we need bandages." She orders, voice shaking a bit. No one moves, and I look up to see Dustin tugging at Steve, the older teen's whole body shaking with excess energy. "We need to change her dressings. Come on you guys!" She shouts, her voice more confident, and they snap into action. Mike tears off towards the bathroom, Steve right behind him. Dustin crosses over to sit next to me, helping Max unwrap my dirty bandages. Lucas sets down a bowl of water, steam billowing out of it as he dunks a dry towel in.

The bloodied mess of wraps is tossed on the table and I barely make a sound as Max starts dabbing at my hands, the hot water burning my skin a bit.

"Alright, we've got some more wraps and I found the rubbing alcohol." Mike offers up, and I let out a gasp when Max cleans a particularly dirty cut, right over the scar on my palm from last year.

"You couldn't find any whiskey?" I gripe, but my voice is heavier than usual.

Steve still snorts, though, taking the rubbing alcohol from Mike and another dry towel. He stands over Dustin and takes my recently-cleaned left hand, carefully dabbing at the blisters with the stinging liquid. Dustin shushes my small whimpers, then traces the bruises around my wrist. "You didn't tell me about... about this."

I shake my head. "No, I didn't. I guess I'm a better liar than I realized."

"You never lied. You just kept your secrets." Dustin argues, and the tone of finality in his voice stops an ensuing argument. I just nod at him then bite my lip, choosing to focus on Max.

"How'd you learn all this, anyway?" I ask her, and she lets out a breathe.

"Skateboarding... I, I fall a lot." She tells me, but there's this... this lilt in her voice like she's keeping secrets of her own. I know she is, I still haven't forgotten what I'd overheard her confessing to Lucas.

After cleaning my right hand with rubbing alcohol, my limbs are wrapped carefully and tightly without causing them to throb from blood loss. Lucas sits down, and Steve leans back against the sink. Dustin's carefully holding my left hand, and I squeeze back to reassure him I'm okay. Well, okay enough to not have another breakdown. Yet. It's bound to happen soon.

Mike walks into the living room, bending down a bit in front of the coffee table and picking up a wrapped cube. "Did you guys know that Bob was the original founder of Hawkins AV?" He asks, back still

turned to us.

"Really?" Lucas asks, voice full of amazement.

"He petitioned the school to start it and everything." Mike turns to us. I have to look down. "Then he had a fund-raiser for equipment. Mr. Clarke learned everything from him. Pretty awesome, right?"

I stand up sharply, chair scratching the ground as it goes. The kids jump. "Roni, are you -"

"I need some air." I cut Steve off, walking out of the kitchen.

"It isn't safe -"

"I'm a human Upside Down detector. I'll be fine." I tell my brother, slamming the front door behind me as I leave the house.

With a sigh I sit down on the porch steps, elbows on my knees and head bowed down.

Last year was... It was rough. Extremely hard. And for most of the fight I was wounded. But at least I had Jonathan. Now, well, I brought this on myself. I messed up. How much of this year would've been different if I had just been honest with everyone? If I told them about my hallucinations. At least now that I know what they are, it'd be easier to explain. It wouldn't be some bombshell I just dropped and walked away from. I can only hope that Nancy didn't tell Jonathan I told her first. She doesn't deserve any of his rage. It's all on me.

And then at the Lab, I had to go play hero. I could've died, again, but that didn't matter because I wanted to right wrongs any way I could.

And I couldn't even succeed at being the hero. All I did was prolong Bob's death, give him hope when there really was none. I failed Joyce, my second mother and one of my closest confidants.

God, I'm so stupid -

"Veronica." I look up as heavy footsteps approach me, and the wood shifts a little at the added weight by my side. "You should be inside,

Hooligan."

"Couldn't breathe in there" I tell Hopper, barely looking at him.

"Yeah, well, there aren't any of those freaks of nature inside."

"No, there aren't." I keep staring straight ahead, watching the trees.

"Why'd you do it? Go to the tunnels?"

"How did you... Oh. Right. The doc explained it to me, and Joyce and Mike."

"Well, that's one last person I have to admit my problems to." I casually mention, picking at the new tears in the knees of my pants.

"You didn't answer my question. Why'd you go there alone? 'Cause it sure as hell wasn't smart or safe, which means you were a hypocrite and played hero without backup."

"You're not allowed to lecture me about 'playing hero' after the shit you just pulled at the Lab." I throw an unimpressed look his way. "But you're right, okay? It wasn't smart or safe of me."

"So why'd you do it? You scared me, Jim." I whisper. "You're the only dad I have left." I quietly admit, tearing up a bit. "And I know you didn't sign up to half-raise a teenage girl, but that's what you are to me."

"Kiddo, hey." One large arm is wrapped around my shoulders and I'm tugged closer to the Chief of Police. "You're like a daughter to me, alright? You know, after... After she died, I came back here to be alone. To trap myself in the past or whatever. Then one of my first months as Chief, I get a call from a scared former classmate, saying her little girl ran away. I honestly found you by luck, but... You wormed your way into my life, Hooligan. So when we figured out Will's drawings are tunnels, and I had my suspicions, I just acted. It wasn't just to help Will and Joyce. I didn't want you to get hurt, again." He exhales shakily. "When you disappeared last year, it was so... surreal. Will was already missing, then I get a call from your mom telling me you were gone. With Will, I had my suspicions that he ran away to see his dad. But I know you better than him, and I knew you'd never go to your dad. I was scared. I didn't want that to

happen to you, again."

I nod. "I get it. It was still a stupid move, but I get it."

"I know."

"Jonathan hates me now. I told him everything." I mutter into his chest. "I knew he would, but it still feels bad. Really bad."

"Kiddo, that boy is incapable of hating you. He's probably pissed and scared, but he loves you. Just give him time."

"I failed Joyce." I mutter.

"Veronica -"

"I tried so hard to save Bob. I didn't know him that well, but I knew he made her happy. She deserves to be happy. She's a second mother to me, and I didn't want her to lose anyone. I failed both of them."

"Listen to me." He moves over a little so I have no choice but to look up at him. "You didn't fail anyone. I promise you didn't, okay?"

"I don't believe you. I probably won't, for awhile."

"I know." He smiles at me all fatherly. "I don't expect you to. People like us... we need reminding of that, more than others. I've got you, kiddo. And I'm proud of you. While you were... while we were driving here," he amends, not broaching the topic of my panic attack, "the kids told me about the junkyard. You sounded like a real badass." I smile.

"I guess my dad did something right, letting me train in archery and all."

"I guess so."

We sit in silence, simply breathing. I jump a bit when the front door opens, and turn to see Jonathan standing there. "Hey, uh... the kids figured something out. They want to talk to us." Hopper sighs forlornly and stands up, grunting as he does. I follow him up. "Actually, Ver and I will be there in a minute."



"Sure, kid. Take it easy on her, though." Hopper pats Jonathan warning lay before stomping back inside.

I cross my arms self-consciously, half looking at Jonathan. "I, uh. I don't hate you."

I blink and give him my undivided attention. "You-you don't?"

"No. I don't. I mean, I'm pissed off and probably will be for awhile, but I don't hate you. Nancy put a few things in perspective for me."

"Whatever she said wasn't an excuse -"

"No, it wasn't. But it was one of your reasons."

"I'm sorry for not telling you. I'm always going to be sorry."

"I'm sorry for not making sure you were actually okay. I'm always going to be sorry for that." He tells me, and I blink away more tears. "You're my sister, rockstar. We're gonna have our fights. We know that. But this... This wasn't just on you. And what's happening to Will is not your fault, okay? I never should've implied it was. That wasn't fair to you." I don't respond, terrified that what I have to say will result in another fight.

*It was fair, I want to tell him, I lied to your face and listened to your mom when she said not to contact you.*

"Come on, before Hopper loses his mind." I snort.

"Too late. He already has." Jonathan laughs, then I'm pulled into a hug.

"I've got so much to tell you, after all this."

"Starting with how you and Nancy finally got your shit together?" I ask him, stepping out of the hug. He blushes and scratches at the back of his neck.

"Jesus, she told you?"

"Accidentally. Call it a... Miscommunication. Come on, Johnny-boy."

He rolls his eyes but pushes the front door open, leaving our fight behind us.

---

Dustin slams Will's *Dungeons and Dragons* manual on the kitchen table, taking a next to Steve and I. Nancy stands on his other side, looking infinitely more relieved since Jonathan and I returned to the kitchen together with smiles on our faces.

"The Mind Flayer." My little brother announces to the group, sans Joyce.

"What the hell is that?" Hopper asks, eyebrows furrowed.

"It's a monster from an unknown dimension. It's so ancient that it doesn't even know its true home. Okay, it enslaves races of other dimensions by taking over their brains using its highly-developed psionic powers."

"Oh my God, none of this is real. This is a kid's game." Hopper gripes.

"Yeah, well, we've got hellhounds -"

"Demodogs. Demogorgon, dogs. *Demodogs*." Dustin explains, and I just sigh.

"Yeah, okay, point still stands. We've got those little bastards running around and creeping through underground tunnels with living, breathing vines. This tracks."

Hopper throws me a look of disbelief, and I shrug nonchalantly.

"This is a manual, and it's not for kids!" Dustin argues with the Chief. "And unless you know something that we don't, this is the best metaphor -"

"Analogy."

"Analogy, D." Lucas and I correct, then give each other air high-fives.

Dustin looks between the two of us like we've grown two heads each.

"Analogy"? That's what you're worried about?" Lucas and I nod. "Fine."

An *analogy* for understanding whatever the hell this is."

"Okay!" Nance throws her hands up a bit, exasperated. "So, this Mind Flamer thing -"

"Flayer. Mind *Flayer*." Dustin corrects, and she sighs in frustration.

"What does it want?"

"To conquer us, basically It believes it's the master race."

"Oh, like the, uh, like the Germans?" Steve asks, and everyone looks at him. I probably just do it more affectionately than condescendingly.

"Uh, the Nazis?" Dustin corrects, and I roll my eyes.

"Yeah, the uh, the Nazis."

"Nazism began in Germany, D, so he wasn't completely wrong." I defend Steve, refusing to look at him as I glare up at my younger brother. Dustin's head snaps back a little at the tone, but then he just smirks.

"You're right, I'm sorry." I narrow my eyes at his change in tone, and do my best to ignore Nancy staring at me with those detective eyes of hers. "Uh, right, if the Nazis were from another dimension, *totally*. Uh, it views other races, like us, as inferior to itself. Except for... Except for you." Dustin looks at me, and I blink. "It chose you, right?"

"The vines did."

"It's a hive mind, Leia. It chose you."

"Right. That isn't freaky or anything." I mutter, Steve patting me on the back.

"It wants to spread, take over other dimensions. Which is probably why it chose you. Only it didn't change you in the way it thought." Mike surmises. "And that's why it attacked you on Thursday, you made it angry."

"I have that effect on things, yes." I sass, and Jonathan snorts in amusement, sending me a wink.

"Whatever the reason, we are talking about the destruction of our world as we know it." Lucas jumps in, veering our discussion back on course.

"That's great. That's great. That's really great. Jesus!" Steve panics, turning away from us to pace. I manage to catch him on his elbow before he gets too far and tug him back to the table, ending his dramatics.

"Okay, so if this thing is like a brain that's controlling everything," Nancy points down to the picture in the book of some squid-looking-man, "then if we kill it..."

"We kill everything it controls." Mike finishes for her.

"We win." Lucas adds. "Theoretically."

"Alright." Hopper gruffs out, walking over to stand beside Nancy and tug the book out of Dustin's hold. "Great. So how do you kill this thing? Shoot it with fireballs or something?" He asks my brother.

Dustin chuckles. "No. No, fire- no , you summon an undead army, uh, because... because zombies, you know, they don't have any brains, and the Mind Flayer, it-it-it likes brains." I blink over at him. "It's just a game, it's a game."

I groan and rub my forehead with my right hand.

"I'm getting a headache." I mutter.

"What the hell are we doing here?" Hopper asks, slamming the book closed and tossing it on the table.

"I thought we were waiting on your military backup." Dustin sasses back.

"Oh, so you *do* know what backup is." I comment, and Hopper points at me in warning, very Harrison Ford-style.

"Shut up, and we are!"

"Even if they come, how are they gonna stop this?" Mike asks, over everything as always. Teenagers, man. "You can't just shot this with guns. Or arrows." He gestures to me, but I nod.

"You don't know that! We don't know anything!" Hopper yells back.

"We know it's already killed everybody in that lab." Mike reminds him, and I wince. Dustin takes my hand in response.

"And we know the monsters are going to molt again."

"*And* we know that it's only a matter of time before those tunnels reach this town."

"Which means we are running out of options." I finish passionately. "I want this to be over. I want to stop losing control and seeing that place and those things."

"They're right." We all look over at the entrance to the kitchen. Joyce stands there, voice breaking but body straight and ready for a fight. "We have to kill it."

I rush over to her, then hesitate for only a second before she pulls me into her side. "I want to kill it."

"Me, too." Hopper walks over to where we're holding each other up.

"I -"

"Me, too, Joyce, okay? But how do we do that?" Hopper asks. "We don't exactly know what we're dealing with here."

"No. But *they* do." Mike announces, walking past us and closer to the unconscious Will. "If anyone knows how to destroy this thing, it's Will. He's connected to it. He'll know its weakness."

"I thought we couldn't trust him anymore. That he's a spy for the Mind Flayer now."

"Yeah, but he can't spy if he doesn't know where he is. And we've got

a spy of our own. An invisible one." Mike looks at me, and the rest follow him. "Dustin told me you astral projected. You can do it again."

"Mike, the confidence is nice, but I don't have control of this shit at the best of times -"

"You can do this, Leia." Dustin interrupts me. "I believe in you."

"So do I." Lucas tells me, and Max nods.

"Veronica," I look over at Mike. "You can do this."

"Okay." I nod. "Okay. But I'm gonna need music, some nougat, and maybe some alcohol."

"We can give you two of those things." Hopper pats my shoulder.

*Well damn, may the Force be with me, I guess.*

---

*3rd Person POV (Steve)...*

Steve sighs as he taps a large black trash bag to the wall, nearly avoiding stabbing his thumb on a rusty nail. When this is all over, he's gonna tell Jonathan to get this fixed. There's no way in hell the shed's actually structurally sound. And judging from the pile of useless junk in front of the shed, some serious cleaning has to be done, too.

Nancy's helping him by cutting large strips of duct tape, and it wouldn't be too awkward if, you know, they had their relationship talk before all this went down. A better one, at least. One with less yelling and accusations and *bullshit*.

"Hey." He looks at her from his crouched position, getting the bottom of the bag in place. "What you did, um, helping the kids... " He straightens up, and braces his right arm against the wall, "That was... really cool." She finishes, big blue eyes staring up at him.

I didn't do it for you, he wants to scream. Maybe if he hadn't bonded with Dustin or grown up a bit more the past two days, he would've.

But he's got no energy for a fight, not after the bus and Roni's panic attack and now this nagging fear that he's going to lose her.

"Yeah." Is all he says, climbing up onto the chair he'd dragged in and taping up some more of the black tarp. "Those little shits are real trouble, you know."

"Believe me, I know." She laughs, then picks up an old newspaper to join in his efforts. "And Vera. She's a handful, too."

Steve looks down at his ex, biting his lip. Thousands of questions are running through his mind. "Uh, yeah. She's trouble?"

Nancy snorts and looks up at him, blue eyes shining with mischief. "Oh, please." She hands him a stapler. "I don't know why you posed it as a question."

"What do you want me to say? That I'm constantly worried for her? That I hate the fact she's an even bigger part of this than she has to be? That she thought she was losing her mind and we all just chalked it up as PTSD, including her? Yeah, she's trouble, but this shit ain't trouble, stupid. I hate it."

"I do, too. Believe me." Nancy tells him, her passionate tone soothing him a bit. She's practically Roni's sister, after all.

"Sorry. I just -"

"Love her."

And there it is. Again. Only this time, he'll be less of a coward. "I do. I, uh, I love you too, you know. Loved."

"I know. I loved you, too." Nancy promises, looking straight into his eyes, not blinking or speaking too high. It's clearly the truth. "But..."

"I'm not him."

"And I'm not her." It's said with acceptance, though, and Steve wishes this was how they broke up.

"We had a good run, though. For awhile." Steve guesses, looking

down.

Nancy grabs his elbow comfortingly, and it's so bizarrely platonic, especially when Steve only feels a slight flutter at the touch. "Steve, we did. I'm sorry we ended like that. You didn't deserve it, neither one of us did. I'm so sorry for calling us bullshit, and you bullshit. We didn't kill Barb, and Roni getting taken isn't on us."

"You may not think that, but I don't think I can stop blaming myself for it." Steve responds, stapling the rest of the tarp. "I mean, none of that would've happened if I hadn't thrown a 'party'."

"That doesn't make it your fault. That's on the Lab and the Demogorgon."

"And now we're dealing with a Mind Flamer."

"*Flayer*." Nancy corrects, and Steve can see her smirk from the corner of his eyes.

"Whatever. It's still ridiculous."

"Vera's gonna be okay, you know that, right?"

"No, I don't."

"Well, I'm choosing to believe it. I don't want I'll do if she isn't."

There's a harshness to her soft voice that makes Steve shiver, yet he can't help but agree. "What'd you say to Jonathan? To get him to relax around Roni?"

"I told him to stop acting like she's the enemy for keeping traumatic shit to herself. We all kept secrets at one point, and Vera's never acted like she's perfect. She made her choice and she regrets it, but I see why she didn't tell us."

"It was still stupid of her." Steve gripes.

"Yeah, well, she dealt with her shit better than the rest of us, anyway."



"She's dating Hargrove, so clearly she isn't dealing with it in the best way. God, Nance, he's a total douchebag. And he keeps calling her 'firey' and shit. She's the damn Ice Queen, or she pretends to be, and she's never once run hot like that." Steve breathes out, then assesses his ex. "Sorry."

"No, no, it's fine. You aren't wrong. Still, Steve... you have to know, she really does like him."

Steve deflates, torn between being happy Roni's still in his life and hating the fact after all this she's still gonna be with Billy Hargrove. "I know. I know she does. He makes her happy, doesn't he?"

"For now, yeah. But as much as she likes him... Steve, it's you. She loves you."

Steve snorts, flashing back to his talk with Dustin. "Yeah. Younger Henderson already spilled the beans."

Nancy rolls her eyes. "Unbelievable. That kid has no filter."

"Yeah. Reminds me of Roni, before her dad left. She was like that, too."

"You remember what she was like five years ago?" Nancy asks, a little incredulous.

"I remember what she was like in elementary school."

"Oh. Oh." Nancy smiles up at him, all soft and romantic. "That long?"

"I've liked her since the sixth grade. I was just, well, an idiot." Nancy giggles, and he throws her a betrayed look. "Aw, c'mon."

"Nazis, Steve."

"Nazism started in *Germany*." He argues, then smiles when he remembers how vehemently Roni defended him. He clears his throat and blushes as he staples a new tarp up. "You know, Dustin said she has no idea how I feel about her."

Nancy snorts again. "Oh, he's totally right. That girl needs

prescription glasses when it comes to looking at you. Or maybe she's just so focused on how she feels that nothing else is noticeable. Which is insane, because you have this big googly eyes right now thinking about her."

He blushes, again, then clears his throat. "You know, most of my exes aren't so keen on talking about my love life."

"Yeah, well, I screwed up as bad as you did when it came to mine." He balks at her words. "I mean, I didn't get back in a relationship with you because you were easy or safe or whatever. You were just familiar, and before all the Upside Down bullshit happened. Does that, did that make sense?" She asks him, and he nods down at her.

"Actually, yeah. It does. I mean, it was a little safe," she gives him a look of agreement, "but yeah, it wasn't a screwed up relationship. It just -"

"It's not what was best for us, in the long run." They smile at each other, then get back to work, the air around them no longer thick with tension. "Hey, did you send in your college application?"

Steve just staples a little louder, wishing he could duct tape his ears to avoid a Nancy Wheeler Lecture. And yeah, this is the first time in a few months being around her is comfortable rather than simply content. Or is it complacent?

If a demodog doesn't kill him, writing the damn college essay might.

---

*Veronica's POV...*

I adjust myself on Jonathan's bed, Mike looming over me with the other kids while Steve sits next to me. Jonathan and Nancy stand behind us, holding onto each other. "Okay. What we need you to do is getting inside the Upside Down. Like, not physically, but... astral project."

"So I go in there and just, what?" I ask, blinking up at them.

"Leia, you're our spy. You've gotta do some recon." Dustin explains. "Will's gonna be talking, or not, but you need to figure out some more

shit for us. Back up anything we get from Will."

"You know, this may not work. I'm exhausted, I haven't had caffeine all day, and my hands freaking hurt."

"Your meds have also probably worn out a bit, so you never know." Dustin throws me two thumbs up in encouragement, and I roll my eyes.

"Veronica, you've got this. Try and find Will in the Upside Down - his connection with the Mind Flayer puts him there thanks to the now-memories. Maybe the real Will is in there, trapped. Even if he isn't, you'll be able to see if he's lying without being seen by him."

"Mike, I could slip up. The vines have grabbed me before, and they sense me occasionally."

"Only because you let them. Don't let them."

"Think of the Upside Down like... like Drew. He's an asshole, and if he were the big bad you'd make sure he didn't see you." Jonathan offers up, and I snort before turning my head to send him a friendly glare.

"Nah, I'll just picture the Upside Down as our dads."

"Even better." He walks closer to clap me on the shoulder, then his shoulders rise in tension. "C'mon, Mike. Don't want to keep my mom and Hopper waiting." Jonathan looks down at me, as reassuring as possible. "You've got this, rockstar."

"Okay." I mutter, then watch him go. The kids follow him out, Dustin giving me a hug before joining his friends.

The last one out is Nancy, who throws a smile my way. "You know, if anyone can do this, it's you." I try to smile back, but it's more of a grimace. Still, Nancy accepts it. "Steve, are you coming?"

I almost snort. If Billy were here he would've gone, "That's what she said." Like Chevy Chase in that SNL skit.

*Oh, Billy. We were supposed to meet... oh my God, it's almost eleven.*

*Two-and-a-half hours ago. Man, I'm gonna have a shit-ton of groveling to do. Do guys like flowers? Nah, I know what he likes. We're fine. I'm sure he stopped by my house. Mom must've told him I lost track of time. He knows it's going to be a hard month for me.*

Steve clears his throat and starts to stand, but the idea of him leaving me makes my heart clench. I grab his arm. "Stay. Please." I whisper, and he nods, his eyes so open and warm.

"Of course." He clears his throat again and looks over at Nancy, who's watching us... fondly? "I'm, uh, staying."

"Good." She grins at us then walks away, feet padding down the hall as she goes. Steve gingerly sits down next to me, then picks up my walkman.

"So, what song should I find on your tape. 'Rock You Like a Hurricane'? 'Cherry Bomb'?"

"No." I shake my head. "Um, 'Boogie Woogie Bugle Boy'. It's track 13."

His pouty lips twitch upwards and he ducks his head. "You're the boss, Roni."

"Oh, shut up." He snorts.

"Very intimidating, princess."

"It's nice." He gives me a questioning look, and it's so damn cute. His cuteness should be illegal. "Um, you calling me that without making me sound like a complete bitch."

"Well, it's how I should've been saying it." He coughs, then gives me my headphones. "Okay, what do you need from me? Should I be quiet, or, you know, sing along to the song? I know the words, thanks to how often you sing it in the kitchen. Man, after this is over can you make that lasagna again? With the sausage and -"

"Steven." He jolts and looks at me, but I can tell my smile is soft and patient. Kind of like the old me. *Old-old* me. "Just don't leave me, okay?"

"I'm not going to leave you."

"Promises, promises." I whisper, then slide my headphones over my ears. With a click of a button the bugle starts to play, and I close my eyes.

Calm, be calm. Powers are always linked with emotions. This should be as smooth as opening a well-crafted door. Turn the knob, but don't fall in. It's gotta be like floating, rather than walking. Breathe, breathe, breathe...

And jackpot, I'm back. It feels like how it was in tunnels. All trippy and shit. Find Will, find Will -

With a rush and a pull in my gut, I'm there in the shed, the wood and hastily stapled tarp covered in sticky vines that pay no attention to me as I walk in. Will's still tied up, vines stretching away from him and slithering through me as they go. It's, well, I'm not gonna say it feels good or anything, because it's fucking weird. I'm all ghost-like and shit.

The voices around me are muffled, but I'm more concerned with the black veins running all through Will's body, how his eyes have snapped open and remain unblinking, brown orbs practically as black as the shadow monster. He still doesn't see me, which is, well, good.

His shadow is also nearly triple the size it should be, tentacles reach out from them. That's the Mind Flayer, I guess, or a part of him. I'm all tingly because it's the Upside Down, but the back of my neck is free of goosebumps so I figure I'm safe so far.

Looking closer, I see that Will is shivering. I'm not feeling cold - well, I'm not feeling anything - but his lips are turning blue and his cheeks are flushed red.

He's freezing. Just how cold is this place?

With a gasp his little body jolts, clearly feeling whatever's going on in the real Hawkins. I stand stock-still, willing myself to remain invisible.

"What, what, what is this?" He asks, only his normal voice comes out

like a bad tape - there's a deep scratch to it. "What is this?" He struggles, wrists rubbing raw as he tugs on the ropes. He stares right at me, except it's through me, and I let out an inaudible sigh of relief. "Why am I tied up?"

*Oh God, I can't do this.*

I turn away to catch my breath and calm myself, and a shadow grows over me, big enough to overtake the whole shed.

*Shit.*

***"I know you're there, little one. I can't see you, but you're there. Why wouldn't you be? A child you care for is in danger."*** The monster breathes out, taunting me, and the shed begins to fade. I count to ten and cover my mouth as the darkness fades and I'm standing in front of a giant hole. It's like the one in the tree from last year, a -

"A gate." I gasp.

***"I am sure you can sense what that is."*** The Flayer hisses. ***"When that girl opened it, she let us in. I waited so long to be let in. To take more. I crave more. Now that I know what humans are like, it's impossible to ignore how superior I am. This language is so very primitive, and you are all so very weak."*** There's a rush around me, and I turn. It doesn't see me, but I have to see it. ***"No, not all. You've managed to surprise me, little one. When I chose you, you had given up hope. You were fading. So moldable. My one mistake was missing how much of a fighter you are. How independent you think, how resistant you can be. That boy is a fighter, yes. And he can resist. Yet, his doubt in himself was his undoing."***

I tilt my head, watching the shadow flutter around. ***"I tried to enter you, you know. Two hosts, one to plan and one to fight. I saw into you, when you were trapped in here with us. The Ice Queen. We like the cold down here, and you fit perfectly. But it was all a lie, I think. Humans lie even better than I. Perhaps you've had more practice."*** The shadow grows larger, covering me completely. ***"You can still save the boy, little one. All you have to do is let me in. I'll release him. Together, we can accomplish so much. We can find the***

***man responsible for this, the one who allowed me passage. We can force those who wronged you to bow and beg for mercy. Let me in, little one. It's time.*** Shadows swirl around me, searching for me blindly. ***"You cannot hide forever, little one. Sooner or later, you will lose control. Then it will be too late. You won't just be saving the boy. We'll let your friends live. Your brother will be alright. Your boyfriend and the man you've come to know as a father will remain unharmed. And that boy, the one you love,"*** he taunts me further, growling as he does, ***"he will live. I will spare them all."***

*Liar.*

***"I admit, killing that girl was not my most brilliant move. She was weak, yes, but her death inspired more fight in you. I am sorry, little one."*** The shadow bites out. ***"Well, as sorry as a being like I can be."***

I remain silent. Don't let him see me, don't let him in.

***"That boy is fading, little one. This is your one chance."*** With a snap I'm being tugged back into the shed, where Will's gone motionless and his lips even bluer. His eyes are glazed and unfocused, and he blinks at me.

***"Veronica, please."*** He whispers, but his mouth doesn't move. His voice just fills the air. ***"Please help me."***

***"Do you hear him begging, little one? I know you can, I know you're still here. I can almost feel you. You need me, little one."***

***"It hurts, and I'm so cold. Please Veronica. Please, it hurts. Why aren't you helping me?"*** Will pleads.

I nearly collapse, but find I'm still floating. I open my mouth, about to say his name, when my ears tune into some tapping. Repetitive tapping. Like, like some secret knock. Or a code. Morse code. I don't know it, but I know what it sounds like. Will's still in there, that voice is only the shadow monster playing a trick on me, and I will not give in.

So I turn and stare up at the shadow, eyes roving over the tentacles protruding out of him. "I'm still here."

***"Ah, I hear you." The Flayer chuckles. "But I cannot see you. That is progress, I suppose. Have you made your decision?"***

"Yeah, I have. I won't let you in. That girl had a name, you know. And what we're going to do to you is all for her." I smirk and channel my best Sarah Connor. "You're gonna be terminated, fucker."

The shadow roars and swipes at me, but its tentacles only swirl around me. "Little one, I grow tired of you insolence. Let. Me. IN!"

*Home, home, home.*

I open my eyes, mouth formed in silent scream as I slide off the bed, arms windmilling for balance.

"Jesus, Roni - RONI!" Steve shouts after me. I slide into the kitchen where Nancy, Dustin, Max, and Lucas are all gathered, hovering next to a radio and scratching a dull pencil into a pad of paper.

"Will's in there."

"Yeah, sis, we figured that out. Morse code."

"No, Dustin, I know. But Will's there, in the Upside Down. He's all gross-looking, though, with black veins bulging out of his body. An-and the shadow monster, it was there. Right behind him, in him. It showed me... it showed me the gate! An-and tried to recruit me, and explained why my mutation is freaky. It's cause I'm a fighter, or some shit like that. Too resistant."

"Did he see you? Veronica, were you safe?" Dustin demands, Max rushing over to me with a glass of water while Lucas waits for the rest of the code.

"No, he didn't see me. I mean, he knew I was there because he was using Will as bait. I talked to him - before you freak out, I didn't give anything away except that he's gonna be terminated. Then I got the hell out of Dodge."

"Roni, slow down, take a sip of water." Steve asks me, voice soft. I nod and take a quick sip, but return to talking. Guys, Will... he looked hypothermic down there. *Cold.* And -"



"The Mind Flayer likes it cold." Dustin gasps, and I nod. "Okay, so it didn't go as planned, but... you did it. Total badass recon, Huntress." We high-five and I gasp for air.

"I'm gonna have a panic attack now."

"Sorry, no-can-do, I've got the rest of the code!" Lucas shouts.

We rush over to him, Steve nudging me along as I keep trying to catch my breath. The paper reads **C-L-O-S-E-G-A-T-E**.

"Close gate." We all read, and Dustin pats me on the back.

"And now we know what gate he me-"

The phone rings, cutting him off, and we all freeze.

*Shit.*

"Shit. Shit!" Dustin shouts, running over to the offending object and slamming it back down on the receiver to hang the caller up. It only starts to ring again, but before he can do anything about it Nancy is wrenching the entire phone off the wall and throwing it down the hall with a grunt.

"Do you think he heard that?" Max asks, and I let out a gasp as goosebumps flutter over the back of my neck. I land on my knees, cup of water rolling away.

"Roni!"

"Veronica!"

"Leia!"

"Vera, what's going on?" My friends shout. I cover my ears and scream, closing my eyes.

*C'mon, show me. Show me, show me, show me.*

I open my eyes and see shadows dashing away from me. They're the size of dogs, and the thundering feet tells me it's more than we can

handle. The vines are parting for me, enticing me to follow, but I'm not needed here for anything other than becoming a puppet.

I squeeze my eyes shut, and when I reopen them it's like my senses were stolen, then given back tenfold. Everything is too much, it's more than before.

Two pairs of blue eyes stare into mine.

Nancy and Dustin. The former speaks first. "Are you -"

Hopper comes in, holding up a rifle. He looks down at me, eyes wide.

"We've got incoming. A lot of of incoming." I warn him, then stand up on my own, brushing nervous hands away.

"Well, it's a good thing some of us have weapons." I shrug at Hopper's words and take my bow and quiver of arrows from Dustin, having removed both when we arrived at the Byers house.

"Jonathan, can you use this?" Hopper asks, holding the gun up. "I said, can you use this?"

I snort, and my best friend shoots me a look. "Uh,"

"I can." Nancy announces, and Hopper breathes in through his nose, tossing it to her. She catches it with ease, accepting the bullets he'd collected and shoving them in the pocket of her jacket. I stand by her side, an arrow already notched while she loads her gun.

"It's a good thing we trained, huh?" I ask her, raising my bow as the goosebumps intensify.

"We're about to find out."

"Veronica, dear, can you -"

"They're almost here, Joyce." I turn to the older woman. "In case I have to barbecue any of these bastards, are you fond of the furniture in here?"

She shakes her head, body shivering with nerves. "No. Have, uh, have

at it I guess."

The air wooshes next to me, and I turn my head to see Steve twirling his bat. Damn, that's still a good look on him.

He catches me staring and sends a wink my way, very reminiscent of King Steve. "You ready, Your Worshipfulness?" He asks me and I gasp, realizing where it's from.

"You've seen *Star Wars*?" I ask, and Hopper makes a gruff noise. Right, not the time.

"All three, Roni."

"Well, are you ready, nerf herder?" He sends me another wink, then twirls his bat, prepared to fight. I raise my bow again, and the goosebumps are practically leaping out of my skin.

The screeching gets louder, the paws pounding on dirt get closer, and so I give Dustin a smile. He looks at me with big, wet blue eyes, and I try to convey every ounce of love I have for the kid.

I return my focus to the living room window, practically willing the beasts to jump into frame.

They jump, alright, but I don't see it. We hear it, instead. These terrified yelps, pained growls, a snap, paws retreating. The goosebumps are rapidly fading, but I don't lower my bow. Not even when a demodog goes sailing through the window, landing on the ground with a dull thud. It doesn't move, neck angled in a strange way and the petals framing its head limp. Hopper points his gun at it, but I'm the one who shoots. The arrow pierces its exposed neck, going straight through. Max makes a noise of disgust, but it's covered by creaking noises.

Footsteps are approaching the house. They're getting closer, and closer, but they're human. Or at least, I hope they're human. I'd know if a demogorgon was coming.

The deadbolt on the door slides out of its socket, the lock on the doorknob twists with a click, and the doorknob turns on it's own.

The first thing I see is a pair of ratty converse. Then jeans rolled up at the ankle, a ripped black shirt, a black jacket, and a girl with Joan Jett makeup and slicked back brown hair, longer than I last saw her. Her nose is bleeding, her stare is intense, and she only has eyes for Mike and I.

Someone answered my birthday wish from last year. I wanted her to be alive, and hear she is.

"Eleven." I breathe out, and this weight I'd been carrying since I watched her disappear is lifted. Mike takes my hand, and it suddenly feels like it's just the three of us. Two kids who care deeply for each other, and the girl who thought she failed them.

## 17. The Gate

Hi all, and welcome to my *Stranger Things* Steve Harrington/OC story! It's been a long, long time coming. Seriously. Since 2017 long.

In this story, we've got the Ice Queen of Hawkins, the older-but-shorter-by-season 2 sister of Dustin Henderson, because he deserves an older sibling. She's Veronica, and even though *Heathers* came out in 1989 I've taken the liberty of borrowing some of my favorite quotes because *Winona Ryder Easter Eggs*. Seriously, I cannot overstate my love for that movie. Anyway, there's more of a backstory for the Henderson family, including adding the dad to the "asshole fathers club", co-president with Lonnie Byers, the prick. Expect explicit language because, hello, *Stranger Things* isn't known for censoring language.

Well peeps, we're here. It's time for my take on 2x09 "The Gate." We pick up with Mike and Veronica learning something about this past year. There's a few arguments, Veronica explains to the others what she learned from the Mind Flayer, and they all come up with a solid plan. We've got drama coming your way, along with the hurricane that is Billy Hargrove, so hold on to your butts. This chapter technically ends on a cliff-hanger, but not the way you might be thinking. It's a good cliff-hanger in the sense nothing bad happens, but I don't want to tie everything up in a bow this chapter since so much has happened. There's also a couple of parallels to the earlier chapters (during season 1) because narrative call-backs, you know? ㄟ(ˊˋ)ㄟ

Since I'm all about expanding the story and seeing what happens to our characters between seasons, there isn't going to be a straight jump to the Snow Ball dance and then season 3. There will be two chapters before the dance, and then a few after because as mentioned in earlier notes, I want to elaborate on the change of relationship between Billy and Max by season 3, because there seemed to be this shift between them that went unexplained considering how season 2 ended. And the whole "will they/won't they?" situation between Steve and Veronica

will finally be resolved. I was originally going to wait even longer for it, but their interactions the past couple of chapters have been so cute that I'm tired of forcing some big confession in season 3 like I originally planned. It's still going to be a cute scene, and I'm not going to make them some bizarrely happy couple - they'll still argue and have their moments, but the thing I've come to love about this pairing of mine is how they always seem to grow more individually through their interactions. Plus, as Murray would say, they've got the real shit: shared trauma.

Also, I realized that in chapter six I said Erica was nine, forgetting she proudly declared herself to be 10 in Season 3. So, that being said, since she doesn't have an official birthday written I made her a September baby so she's still 10 by the time I get to her verbal throw down with Murray. I know it's not especially important, but I'm a stickler for details.

Warnings for Billy. He's gonna be a dick, but no one should be surprised at that.

Enjoy the story! I only own Veronica.

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I stand stock-still, Mike squeezing my hand like he's trying to make sure this is real. I squeeze back, then nudge him forward. With just a twitch of my lips he understands me, and like two magnets he and El are drawn to each other. "Eleven." He breathes, and they wrap their arms around each other.

"Mike." She gasps out, holding him close. They rock back and forth before stepping away from each other.

"I never gave up on you. I called you every night. Every night for -"

"353 days. I heard." She smiles up at him, and it's so wonderfully breathtaking to see. I pause, then, mind flashing back to last year.

"It was you." I gasp. "In the woods on Christmas Eve. It was really you." She looks at me and nods, then Mike steps a little out of the way so I can rush over and hug her. She's my exact height now, and I laugh tearfully as I use the sleeve of my sweater to wipe the blood

from under her nose. "You've gotten so big, sweetheart." I whisper to the younger girl, still not quite believing this is the same El we found in Mirkwood. She smiles shyly and nuzzles her forehead into my neck.

"I'm sorry."

I shake my head and lift her chin, looking into her round brown eyes. "No, don't be sorry. Okay? You being here is what's most important."

"Okay." She whispers, and I release her.

"Why didn't you tell us you were there?" Mike asks her, voice soft but lacking accusation. "That you were okay?"

"Because I wouldn't let her." I blink and turn to see Hopper approaching, but he's only looking at El. "The hell is this? Where have you been?"

"Where have *you* been?" El shoots back. I stare in confusion as he wraps her in a fatherly embrace.

I gasp and take a step back, Mike catching me as he fumbles, too. "You..."

"You've been hiding her." The younger Wheeler finishes for me, actually finding the words. Anger - rightfully so - fills his voice and he advances. "You've been hiding her this whole time!" He shoves Hopper in the back, who turns and grabs his arm.

"Hey, hey. Let's talk."

"What is there to talk about?" I grind out at him, voice frozen, tugging Mike out of his grip as my vision turns red. He let me think she was dead. He let me mourn her and feel guilty for failing.

"Now. Alone." He growls at us, then grabs and pulls Mike, who drags me after him. I drop my bow as we go, and the clattering sound it makes as it lands echoes through the silent house.

We walk into the nearest room and Hopper closes the door behind him. I lean back against Jonathan's bed, arms crossed and eyes

tearing up. "Protecting her. Protecting her?!" Mike shouts at him in disbelief, the Chief having grunted a short explanation on our way.

"Listen. *Listen to me*, both of you." The Chief of Police runs a hand through his hair. "The more people know about her, the more danger she's in. And the more danger you and your family are in -"

"Oh, what so, we should be thanking you?!" Mike screams, and Hopper sets his gun down so it's leaning by the door.

"I'm not asking you to thank me! I'm asking you to try and understand."

"I don't! I don't understand!"

"That's fine, that's fine! Just do not blame *her*! Alright, she's upset enough as it is." Hopper growls, pointing at the closed door behind him.

"I don't blame her! I blame you! *I blame you!*" Mike screams in his face, and I can hear him holding back sobs. I look away.

"That's okay, kid. That's okay." Hopper's voice has a rough, wet edge to it, too.

"No! Nothing about this is okay! Nothing about this is okay!" My eyes flit back over to them, and I watch Mike slam angry fists into the Chief's chest, exploding into intelligible yells and sobs.

"Oh, jeez -"

"Liar! Liar! Liar!" Mike screams, forcing the tall man into the door. Hopper just catches him.

"Stop it! Stop it!" He pulls the kid into a hug, head pressing down on top of a mess of black hair. I keep my arms crossed and shift my weight, looking away. "I'm sorry. I'm sorry."

Mike eventually starts to calm down and Hopper releases him. His heavy footsteps pound towards me, Mike sniffing behind him. "Look, I know you're angry, kiddo. And it's okay that you are. But I need you to understand why I did it. Why I took her in."



I nod then tilt my head to stare up at him, my face void of emotions but my voice frosty. "No, I understand. I do. But here's the thing... you lied. A lie of omission is still a lie. You let me believe she was dead, you let me feel guilty about failing her."

"You didn't -"

"Yeah, you had good intentions. But you lied to Joyce." I point towards the door, tears sliding down my face. "You lied to the kids. You lied to Mike." I point at the crying boy, then myself, and my voice breaks. "And you lied *to me*."

"Oh, kiddo. I'm -"

"You pulled almost the same shit my dad did. Yeah, it's different, but... you lied to me for almost a whole year. You saw what I became, and you just let it happen. Everyone just let it happen, but I was hoping you wouldn't." My voice keeps breaking. "I trusted you, and you *lied*." I shake my head and wipe away my tears. "Come on, Mike. I'm sure the others are waiting for us." I brush past Hopper and open the door, letting Mike slip out first.

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### *3rd Person POV (Billy)...*

Billy was anticipating having a good night. He looked good, ready to see his baby girl after nearly two days without her. He didn't know when he became so dependant on her to feel good, but damn, Veronica Leigh Henderson was everything he never knew he needed, but everything he wanted. So deliciously human, never covering up any physical imperfections - like her scars made her imperfect or whatever. They just made her more beautiful.

But then his dad and stepmom came home and Max was gone and poof, there went his night. Billy wanted nothing more than to deck his dad for insinuating his girlfriend was a whore. Please, Neil Hargrove probably slept with enough of them after mom left.

He tried to get a hold of Veronica, sucking in deeply on the phone to cover his tears, but no one answered. He at least left a message - who knows how much groveling he'd have to do if he didn't warn her. He

had stopped by her house first, hoping Max had somehow ended up there. He'd have been killing two birds with one stone - Maxine would be easy to collect and he'd get to see his girl. But no one was home, and the house was dark. The only car in the driveway - besides his own - was Veronica's *Falcon*.

*She lost track of time.* He had thought to himself. *Or there was a family emergency.* Look at that, both of them are going to be groveling. Which means neither one of them can be pissed at the other.

Still, screw his stupid dad. Seriously. Low-life piece of shit acting like a man by hitting him, yelling at him, hitting his mom -

No. He shouldn't go down that particular rabbit hole.

And look, while Veronica's his girl, he's not blind to other women. So yes, he flirted with the exceptionally hot Mrs. Wheeler. Where the hell Nancy got her stick-body from confused him the minute he saw *Karen* in a robe, because she's got curves as great as his Queen V's.

But his flirting didn't mean anything. It was a necessary evil, to find his stupid stepsister and bring her home. Hopefully before midnight, or his dad would really go apeshit.

*"Notice how the word 'sister' is still included?"* Veronica had asked him, and God does he want to just yell that she's wrong, but language-wise she's right. It doesn't mean he has to like it, not when Max gets off for her bullshit scot-free and he's stuck taking her punishment.

Billy accelerates even faster, reaching over to take a swig from his flask. Who knows? Maybe when Veronica sees the inevitable bruises that'll mar his skin, she'll forgive him. He needs her to forgive him. His fiery queen.

He takes another swig, letting the music wash over him as he drives through the dark, shit-hole town.

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*Veronica's POV...*

I stand between El and Lucas, the former holding my hand reassuringly as we make a plan. The only way to save this world and

Will is to close the gate.

El's resolved herself to closing it, though, which only terrifies me. It's not that I don't think she can do it... I mean, part of me feels that way. But a larger part is scared she'll succeed but we'll lose her for good. I don't think Mike can take having her be alive all this time, only to lose her an hour later.

Hopper looks at all of us from his spot by a boarded up kitchen window. His eyes fall on me for longer than the others, but he moves on. "It's not like it was before. It's grown. A lot."

"I know." Everyone looks at me, and I cross my arms. "The Mind Flayer took me to it while you were all questioning Will." Hopper's face screws up a bit. "I was going to tell you. I'm trying this new thing called *honesty*. You should check it out some time."

"Veronica!" Joyce admonishes. I huff and turn away from the group to pace, deep in thought, biting my lip.

Hopper just sighs, carrying on like I never spoke. "I mean, this also depends entirely on whether or not we can get in there. The place is crawling with those dogs."

"Demodogs." Dustin corrects, and my shoulders shake with silent laughter at the noise Hopper makes.

"I'm sorry, what?"

"I said, uh, demodogs. Like demogorgons and dogs. You put them together, it sounds pretty badass -"

"How is this important right now?" Hopper asks, voice filled to the brim with exasperation at my little brother.

"It's not, I'm sorry." He mutters, and I roll my eyes affectionately despite no one else being able to see it.

"I can do it." El speaks up, confident and so grown up.

"You're not hearing me -"

"I'm hearing you." She interrupts Hopper. "I can do it."

"Even if El can, there's still another problem. If the brain dies, the body dies." Mike reminds us, and I keep pacing, knowing exactly what he's thinking.

"I thought that was the whole point?" Max asks, confused.

"It is, but if we're really right about this... I mean if El closes the gate and kills the Mind Flayer's army..."

"Will's a part of that army." Lucas breathes out, and I nod as I walk, still biting my lip as I think. "And... and what about Veronica?"

I stop briefly to turn to him, shaking my head. "Remember, it's different for me. The connection is one-sided. Closing the gate for me will be like, like Leech. You know, from *Uncanny X-Men*? With the gate closed, my powers will be negated. I mean, when I was at Camp Know Where in the summer, I was Upside-Down free. So the Mind Flayer has no hold over me. I'm not part of his army, or a hive mind."

"But what if you're wrong?" Nancy asks, and I glance over at her.

I could be wrong, yeah. But the way the Mind Flayer was talking to me, it's clear I'm a wild card. The rules of the Upside Down - whatever they are - don't apply to me.

"When the people from the Lab were burning the vines in the tunnels, I was unaffected. And whenever I've attacked the vines physically since my DNA changed, it hasn't hurt me. Not like it has Will, so..."

"Closing the gate will kill him." Mike finishes as I get back to pacing.

"Veronica." I stop moving again and turn to look at Joyce. She stares up at me from her seat at the table, eyes filling with tears but voice strong. "You said you spoke to the Mind Flayer. Wh-what did he say?"

"He said there was only one way to save Will."

"And you kept it to yourself?" Jonathan growls out, but I keep looking at Joyce.

"The only way *I* can save Will is if I agree to let him in." The room falls deathly silent. "Apparently, when he chose to mess around with my DNA, it was because I was at my weakest. Alone, lost, losing hope. 'Moldable' he called me." I start to pace again. "But after I was found, I became too resistant. Even when I thought I was losing my mind, I fought back. He said that Will's doubt in himself was his 'undoing', which is just a different way of saying Will's younger and much more innocent." I sigh and face the living room. "The Mind Flayer also admitted that killing Barb was a mistake. He didn't count on me to be angry at the right people, I think. He doesn't understand *us*. Our connections, how we think, how we feel. His superiority complex is bigger than he is, but it's entirely dependant on that gate being open. Without it, he's stuck craving our world with no satisfaction delivered." I run a hand down my face. "I almost said yes, you know. He's a... well, he said and did exactly what should've worked. But who knows what that asshole can accomplish controlling me." I snort and look up at the ceiling. "He wanted me to be his fighter." I turn and stare at Jonathan. "I didn't like saying no to him. But you have to know that if you ask, I'll do it. I'll let him in. Even if he's lying about letting Will go, I'll say yes. What do you need me to do?" I ask him, and he shudders before walking around the table.

"Here's what I need you to do. I need you to never talk to an interdimensional asshole again. I need the Upside Down to leave you alone. I need my sister here with me, because I'm not sacrificing you for Will. He'd kill me in return, and I'd help him." I nod, speechless. "And I need you to think about everything he didn't tell you. Think of it like the landscape pictures I take. Sometimes certain things I take a photo of are out of focus. That's usually what I'm most interested in seeing. What did you feel when you were there? Physically, not emotionally." He amends.

"When I astral project, I don't feel anything, but... but he did tell me another reason why he picked me. He looked inside me when I was there. I don't know how but he did. He-he saw that people called me 'Ice Queen'. He, I don't think he understands what nicknames are." I snort, then bite my lip, staring off into space. "And whenever I've actually been there, I've been cold. I was freezing when Nancy found me last year. And when I saw the Upside Down version of Will, he was definitely hypothermic. It's the cold. Joyce, the cold!" I shout,

and she gasps, shooting up and rushing into Will's room, where we left the yet-again unconscious boy.

The room is freezing, cold November air swirling around and blowing at the curtain. "Will said he likes it cold. We keep giving him what he wants!" Joyce announces, slamming the window shut with a bang. Man, those drugs must be good, 'cause the boy keeps on sleeping.

"If this is a virus, and Will's the host, then -"

"Then we need to make the host uninhabitable." Jonathan finishes for Nancy, looking at me as we both crouch beside Will.

"On Christmas Eve, the vines tried to pull me to them. Attack me or something." I speak up. "I flicked my lighter on and before I could even burn them, they backed off."

Nancy squeezes my shoulder. "So if he likes it cold..."

"We need to burn it out of him." Joyce speaks up, and I stare up at the woman, unsurprised at how ready for a fight she is.

Mike clears his throat. "We have to do it somewhere he doesn't know this time."

"Yeah, somewhere far away." Dustin agrees with his best friend.

"I've got a place." Hopper announces. "It'll work."

*It's going to have to, because we've only got one shot at this.*

---

Nancy, Steve and I riffle through the junk Hopper tossed from the shed, looking for any kind of heat source. I pick up an old toaster oven and flip it around. I mean, if it catches on fire, that's more heat, right?

"I'm, uh, I'm going to go with him. Jonathan." Nancy announces, picking up an old space heater. I look between her and Steve, suddenly feeling like I'm intruding. I mean, I've got no idea what's been going on with them - I've been a little distracted by my own shit.

Steve merely shrugs, then smiles over at her. "Good. He's going to need you."

I'm taken aback by how friendly they're being. It's... there's no jealousy laced in Steve's voice, and there was a calmness in Nancy's when she admitted to her plan.

*What the hell did I miss?*

Nancy lifts up some smaller heaters and smiles at me. "I'm going to go put this in Jonathan's car."

"Okay." I watch her leave, eyebrow raised, then turn to look at Steve. He smiles at me then gets back to work, crouching down and tossing aside a mess of Christmas lights.

"You should go with them, too. Nancy and Jonathan." Steve suggests, standing up and walking over to me. I struggle to pull out a rusted radiator, and he helps me.

"I want to, I do, but... I can't leave Dustin. He needs me, too." The older teen nods. "Are you... are you really okay with Nancy going with Jonathan?" The "being with him" goes unsaid.

Steve glances down at me, a soft smile blooming on his face. "Yeah. We, uh, we talked. Closure and all that shit. I still care about her a lot, but... we aren't who each other needs."

I bite my lip, but don't press him. "Okay. You know, you did, uh... you did make her happy." I offer him the truth albeit awkwardly.

He snorts. "Not really, not for a few months. I pretended not to notice, though. So. I may be a shitty boyfriend," he lifts up a less-busted space heater and grins, "but it turns out I'm a damn good babysitter."

I smile up at him. "I guess. Don't take any of my gigs, though, after all this. I've been a babysitter longer than you. I've got seniority."

Steve laughs, shaking his head as he climbs off the pile and joins me, lifting most of our remaining haul with one arm while the other is thrown over my shoulder. "I totally promise not to. We could team

up, though. It'd be way more efficient. We've been doing well together, so far."

I shrug, then grin up at him. "Sounds like a plan. I should warn you though; Lucas has a little sister, Erica. She turned 10 a month ago, but she's still in the dress-up phase. She also recently discovered makeup, and thinks pink looks good everywhere, especially if it's pure glitter. Oh, and don't even get me started on how hard she pulls on hair when she's braiding. I almost had a bald spot by the time she was done." I make sure to flick my eyes up at his legendary locks, and Steve visibly pales.

"On second that, you can watch Erica by yourself. I'll help you with the other kids."

I laugh as we walk around the house and towards the little driveway, Steve passing Nancy the last of our gathering while Jonathan pulls me off to the side.

"I can still come with you guys." I offer, and he shakes his head while pulling me into a hug.

"No, you need to stay with your brother."

"You're my brother, too."

"Yeah, but... look, I need you safe, and staying here seems like the best option. And I don't know what kind of hero-shit you'll pull if the Mind Flayer tries to cut a deal again."

"Oh ye of little faith." He raises an eyebrow at me as he looks down. I roll my emerald orbs. "Whatever, I see your point. I get it. You have the girl, you don't need little old me anymore." I try to make it sound playful, but there's admittedly a hint of jealousy in my tone. Look, I'm happy for both him and Nance, I am, but I don't want to get left behind. *Again.*

"Shut up, you're my sister, I'm always going to need you. Who else is going to help me win back Nancy's affection when I mess up?"

"That's a good point, you're hopeless. *Especially* when it comes to girls."



"Okay, *ouch*, uncalled for." He slaps me up the back of my head, then squeezes me closer.

"I'll see you when this is over." We break apart. "You're going to save Will, and El's going to close the gate."

"Things don't always go according to plan. Not for us, anyway."

"No." I shrug. "But they will this time. I've got faith."

He nods then kisses my forehead, returning to the car to talk to Steve and Nancy. Joyce approaches me, having been walking to the car already. I notice how her gaze lingers as she stares at Bob's abandoned vehicle. We pull each other into an equally-strong hug, no words needing to be exchanged as she kisses my forehead in that wonderful motherly way of hers, then release me so she can join Jonathan.

I turn back to the house and smile at what I see. El is talking to the other kids. My gaze flickers to where Hopper is standing, smoking a cigarette and watching them. When he notices me heading his way he straightens, arms folded.

"I understand. It still hurts, but I understand. But you're going to owe me *big time*. I'm talking 'getting out of jail' passes and no parking tickets. And, like, probably a really good college recommendation letter. And a *paid* internship."

He smirks and nods. "Okay, Robin Hood."

"But in order for you to pay up, you're gonna have to come back. Both of you. You come back, okay?"

"Okay." He pulls me into a hug. "I'm sorry."

"Yeah, I know. I'm sorry, too. You could never be like my dad. You're totally better."

He snorts and ruffles my loose curls, then clears his throat. "El... come on, let's go." He interrupts whatever moment he notices El and Mike about to have, and lights a cigarette. "It's time."

She nods and leaves Mike as Hopper crosses behind his car to stand at the driver door. El stops in front of me, though, and I can hear Hopper's sigh of exasperation as she does. "I'm going to come back."

"Okay." I smile at her.

"Okay." We hug, brief but sweet, then I let her go. I walk up the steps of the porch to join the others, Steve behind me with Dustin and Mike wrapped around me. Engines starting and headlights on, the two cars pull out of the driveway and away from the house, leaving the rest of us behind.

The minute the lights disappear and the sounds of rumbling engines fade, I turn to the others. "I... I'm going to go on patrol. I left some shit at Castle Byers, too, so..."

"Absolutely not." Steve glares down at me, but I raise an eyebrow, unimpressed. "You're not going out there alone. The demodogs are still out there, and the Mind Flayer wants you."

"He won't have me." I promise, but Steve shakes his head.

"You don't know that."

"I do, actually. You want to know how?" He tilts his head. "I've still got too much to fight for."

"Leia, I don't think -"

I turn to Dustin and pull him into a hug. "Chewie, I won't go far. I know those woods like the back of my hand, and I'll be able to sense those bastards before they even sniff me out."

"You'll have your walkie? Set to channel 8?" He asks me, breaking away from me.

I wink and nod. "Channel 8."

"And your weapons?" Mike asks worriedly.

"And a flare gun?" Lucas adds.

I look at the boys. "Come on, who do you take me for, some amateur?"

They grin, and Max comes forward. "You... you'll be okay, right? I don't want to be the one to tell Billy something happened to you."

I hold open my arms, just a touch, expecting a head shake and instead receiving a warm hug, red hair in my face as we hold each other. "The only thing you'll have to tell your stepbrother is that we're now buddies."

"He's gonna hate that." She comments, voice wavering a bit. I narrow my eyes at the hint of fear.

"Well, I'm pretty sure it's impossible for him to hate me." We step away from each other and she nods, smiling shyly.

"I, uh, I can see why. You're a badass, Veronica."

I grin and wink. "So are you, Mad Max."

"Wait, you knew she was -" Dustin starts to ask me, and I glance down at my bare wrist.

"Oh, wow, look at the time, I need to go."

"Veronica -" I laugh and dash into the house, the boys laughing at the still-stammering Dustin.

---

Walking through the woods is less tiring than it's been recently. Less, I don't know, scary or whatever. I mean, there's a prickling under my skin from the residual danger, but... this is my home, and I'm going to fight to remember that.

Still, I'd forgotten how quiet it can be out here without a bunch of kids and an exasperated older teen stomping around, shouting at each other or complaining about needing a break to breathe. The wind howls and blows falling leaves around, branches wave in the breeze, and the birds that haven't yet migrated chirp and quack and honk in the distance. There's even an owl hooting as I get closer to Castle Byers.

Finally at the fortress I shift the curtain over, ducking a little to step through. My remaining belongings are exactly as I left them, Castle Byers consistently being undisturbed by animals and weather. Jonathan and Will built this place together, after their dad left. Johnny missed three days of school thanks to the cold he got and was the most demanding sick guy ever, but... but I think it helped them handle Lonnie leaving better than I did with my own dad.

Well, they also weren't blindsided and knew their dad was a piece of work well before he walked out the door.

Whatever they knew or didn't know about Lonnie, they did a good job on Will the Wise's Castle.

With a sigh I sit down on the mattress and straighten up a few miscellaneous objects, tracing a finger down Will's drawing of his D&D characters. I grab my duffle, too and sort through it to make sure everything's in order. There's even an apple stashed away, and my stomach growls when my eyes rove over it. God, I haven't eaten an actual meal in over a day.

There's nothing more satisfying to me right now than chomping down on a piece of fruit, so in less than a minute my craving wins out. I have to stop myself from scarfing down the core of the apple and toss it out the open entryway to decompose in the dying grass.

Wiping my mouth with the sleeve of my sweater I stand and sling my duffle onto my shoulder, bow in one hand and flashlight in the other as I leave Castle Byers behind me.

My trek back to the house is slow, and I take the long way so I can actually patrol. Steve's handy with a nail-bat, and Lucas has his wrist rocket, but the other three don't have anything to defend themselves with. Not efficiently, anyway.

I should have left my knife with Dustin.

Leaves crunch softly under my boots as I walk through the forest, stepping over rocks and fallen branches. It's calming almost, despite how scared I am of slipping into the Upside Down. How afraid I am of losing control, especially with how wound up I am.

It'll all stop though, when the gate closes. Hopefully. It'll have to. And I'll feel free from this shit, just like I did at Camp Know Where. I'll still have my nightmares, but that's all they'll be - bad dreams. I'm like that Queen Song, I want to break free.

I'm closer to the house, now, only a few minutes away. In the near distance, an engine rumbles dangerously, forcing me to stop moving and listen carefully. It can't be the others, unless they forgot something. Or... or what if it is and something went very wrong.

My walkie crackles to life and I dive behind the nearest tree, clicking it as my brother's voice comes through. **"Leia, do you copy?"**

"I copy." I whisper through the device, one ear trained on any potential incoming.

**"Veronica! Bil-Billy's here! Please, come back, you're the only one who can stop him!"**

I jump at the urgency in Max's voice, having expected my brother to keep talking. "What are you talking about? What's he going to do?"

**"He's going to kill me!"** She whisper-screams, then the walkie goes silent.

It takes me a second to reboot, and then I'm tearing through the woods towards the house, veins pumping. My mind's gone a little blank, thoughts rolling around like a hamster ball as I grow more and more confused.

Why is she so scared of Billy? Billy... he isn't like that. He isn't a monster. He-he cares.

*About you.* My brain taunts me, and I stumble a bit over a rock before catching myself. *Stupid little girl, he cares about you. But what about the others?*

I try to recall every interaction when he and Max were together. The way she stayed away from him, the glares and the anger in his eyes.

*"Billy's always been a dick, but now he's just angry. All the time."* Max had told Lucas.

No, no. Billy isn't like that.

But shit, what am I gonna tell him when he sees me? We had plans, and those obviously went to shit, but I can't tell him why!

I get to the Byers house, huffing and puffing, just in time to see Steve pouncing up from the driveway and rushing towards the open door and the screams inside. I follow him, feet pounding as I run after him, duffle sliding off my shoulder and onto the steps beneath me, along with my definitely-broken flashlight.

The screams have gotten louder, and I slide into the kitchen in time to see my boyfriend laughing at Steve like some kind of maniac, blood dripping from his nose and a wild look in his eyes.

"Looks like you got some fire in you after all, huh? I've been waiting to meet this King Steve everybody's been telling me so much about." Billy taunts, getting in Steve's face.

"Get. Out." Steve orders, tone dangerous as he pokes Billy in the chest, shoving him back with just one finger. Billy makes to swing at him -

"What the hell is going on?!" I shout, and the house falls silent. The kids move to stand behind me, and Max grabs onto the back of my sweater. Her hand's shaking.

Steve turns around, looking disheveled. Billy just smirks at me dangerously, and I'm startled by how unattractive I find it. He's wearing the same maroon shirt I met him in, unbuttoned to his navel and necklace on display. While I can smell the alcohol from here, he isn't drunk. His eyes are clear, even as they burn with bloodlust.

"Baby girl, fancy seeing you here!"

"Your sister called me." I walk towards him calmly, like I'm approaching a volatile animal. Max barely releases me from her grip. "She said you were here."

"Yeah. Did she tell you she ran off? She ruined our night, baby girl. Had to cancel to find the little bitch." I wince at his tone, but he doesn't notice. "I called your house, you know, but no one picked up."

So I stopped by. You know what I found? Nothing. No one was there. Where've you been, Queen V?"

"Camping." I answer, then hold up my bow. "Hunting. I lost track of time, and then..." I clear my throat. "Mom's cat went missing. She thought Mews might've headed to the woods, and I know them better than anybody, so she had Dustin radio me." I hold up my walkie and set it down on the table. "Mom's probably running around town looking for the cat. I'm sorry I couldn't contact you."

"Oh, I'm sorry too, baby girl." He tells me, voice smooth and soft. "It's okay. We can't be mad at each other. Shit went down on both sides. I forgive you, beautiful."

I blink and nod, walking past Steve. I feel him try to reach for me. "Thank you, Billy."

"Say it. Say it back." He whispers, and I touch his cheek gently, setting my bow down next to my walkie so both hands cup his jaw.

"I forgive you."

He hums, then shoves our mouths together. It's... it's so violent. There's biting, and it's all him asserting dominance. I take it, but the butterflies I normally feel are reluctant.

*This isn't Billy. Or maybe it is.*

He finally releases me, then tugs me into his side, not looking away from Steve. I wince at how strong the hold is, my torso feeling constricted. "I'm sorry about the cat, baby girl. I believe you. I mean, why shouldn't I? You wouldn't be hanging out with Harrington, not after your fight at Tina's." Steve glares at him. "But boy, baby girl, do I have some news for you. Turns out, everybody wants you. Isn't that right, Harrington." I look between them in confusion, going still as I stop trying to gently squirm away. "Tommy told me everything, buddy, when he decided to latch onto me. He told me about your obsession with my Queen V, how you were too big of a pussy to do anything about it. He was surprised, you know." Billy points at Steve then releases me, walking closer to the taller teen. Closer to the kids.

I pick my bow back up and sneak behind the table, Max and the others rushing over to me in Billy's distracted state. "He was surprised you picked Wheeler, given how much you love *her*." I look at Steve, who's pointedly ignoring me in favor of focusing on my boyfriend. "You missed your shot, though. I told you. I told you I got the prize." Prize? "She ain't yours. She's *mine*. Queen V," he doesn't look away from Steve as he addresses me, "it's you and me, beautiful. Because I'm the best you've ever had, baby girl." His voice is soft, his tone taunting. But the way he's egging Steve on, it reminds me of... it reminds me of last year, just a bit, behind the movie theatre. Where words flew, then fists followed. Nancy the Slut. Humility and Perspective. "You're the best I've ever had, Veronica. Why don't we get out of here, huh?" He turns his head to look over at me, then his eyes flick to where Max hangs off my arm. "Ditch the little bitch and those brats. I've missed you Veronica, it's been *days*. Missed your lips, your body, your moans. You make the sweetest sounds when I take you." He licks his lips and my whole body blushes at the vulgar admission, my brother right behind me, listening to what I'm like when I'm getting down and dirty. "Missed making the Camaro *rock*." Billy continues. "Look at that tight body. It's all mine. Ain't that right, Harrington?" He returns his attention to Steve, who's vibrating with anger. "I know you wish you could get in on the action. Bet you'd love to feel my girl. But she's mine to wreck, mine to make scream. And I make her scream. She's *mi*."

Before he can finish, a fist flies through the air and catches him on the cheek, my boyfriend stumbling after it.

"Yeah Steve! Kick his ass!" My brother yells, and Steve brushes the hair from his face, throwing a quick glance my way. Then he ducks, Billy going at him with a jab. Steve swings again, and again, fists hitting any part they can reach while the kids cheer. I try to go forward and stop it, eyes welling up with angry tears, but Max holds onto me, shaking her head in fear.

I let out a scream when I catch Billy bringing a plate down onto Steve's head, my best friend clutching the wound in pain and curling over. Billy whoops with glee and catches Steve in the face before tugging him closer by the collar of his jacket. "Nobody. Tells me what to do." He warns, then shoves the clearly-concussed Steve out of the



kitchen, clear into the living room. Steve falls without a sound but Billy still advances.

With a growl I'm tearing myself away from the kids, accidentally releasing my bow on the way. It doesn't matter, though, I still launch myself onto his back as he jumps on top of Steve and starts to wail on him.

"Stop it! Billy, *stop!*" I roar, tugging at him with all my might. But as in-shape as I am, Billy's stronger. I wrap my arms tighter around his neck, going for a choke-hold like Hopper demonstrated to me years ago. He's too quick, though, too distracted by his violence. I scream louder and pull harder, until an elbow jabs sharply into my ribs. Then I'm screaming in pain, my sides already probably bruised from his hold on me in the kitchen. "Shit, that *hurt* Billy!" I shout, groaning in pain.

And like that, he stops. Freezes, with one arm still pulled back, fist closed and poised to punch. I can see it twitching, though, and look over to the kids, face pleading for help. It comes in the form of a resolved Max, holding up a syringe as she tosses the container of sedatives away. With a grunt I tug Billy's head back and expose his neck, Max jamming the needle into it and sliding the liquid into his system. I fall off him with a groan as he stands, landing harshly on my ass. He looks at me, eyes glazed over and lips downturned before he turns fully to glare at his stepsister. The syringe is still in his neck, so he pulls it out and looks at it. "The hell is this?" He asks, panting. He approaches Max sloppily, and I force myself to stand, hurrying as quick as I can to pull her behind me. Billy stares at me, looking lost. He reaches out for me then stumbles, glaring over at Max. "You little shit, what did you do?" The drugs start to really kick in and he starts falling backwards. As he goes down, I stop forcing Max and I back. "What did you do?" He lands on the hard floor, going pliant. Limp.

He starts to laugh and Max holds up Steve's forgotten nail-bat, holding it high in the air. "From here on out, you leave me and my friends alone. Do you understand?" She asks, and the chill coming off her is so reminiscent of me that my heart swells with pride. It's the sound of a girl tired of taking someone else's shit, and it's *beautiful*.

"Screw you." Billy mutters, smacking his lips tiredly.

Max swings the bat down, just missing his crotch, and Billy's head shoots up. I wince at the sound, but then I see Steve and stop feeling so bad.

She yanks the bat out of the hardwood floor. "Say you understand!" She screams. "Say it! Say it!"

"I understand." Billy whispers out sleepily.

"What?" Max presses.

"I understand."

I snort cruelly as he struggles to keep himself awake. Despite the kids' protests I approach him, then lean down to whisper in his ear. "We're over, Hargrove. You have a nice night."

His eyes shut and his head rolls to the side, a snore escaping his mouth. I snort again, then my gaze flicks over to Steve. He hasn't gotten up. His face is covered in blood and quickly forming bruises. I can't... I can't see him breathing.

"*Oh my God, Steve.*" I breathe out, then crash down onto the ground next to him and feel around for a pulse. "*Steve, baby, please. Please be alive. C'mon, baby, please be breathing.*" It just slips out of me, and I bow my head in relief when I get a pulse. His chest is slow-rising, but his nose is flaring and his mouth is letting out air. Tears sliding down my face I press my lips to any unbloodied part of his face I can find, shoulders shaking as the adrenaline fades and is replaced with fear and anger. "I'm so sorry, baby. *I'm so sorry.* Please wake up. *Please.*" I plead, then brush the hair from his eyes. He lets out a grunt and a relieved laugh escapes me, wet and gross. "There we go. C'mon, handsome."

He groans again, then nuzzles the side of his face into my once-more blood covered gauze.

I look up as the other kids join me, shaking with fear. My brother wraps his arms around me, pressed against my back and hat jamming into the side of my head.

"Did he... did he hurt you?" Mike asks me, Lucas doing his best to

press some butterfly bandages onto Steve's cuts while his hands shake.

"A little. I'm fine. Jesus Christ, I'm so sorry. I'm so, so sorry." I apologize to them, then stroke Steve's hair. "This is all my fault, I'm so sorry."

"No! No, this was all on Billy, okay!" Max orders, having dropped the baseball bat. "None of this is your fault!" She insists. Her confidence is contagious, and I have no choice but to nod in agreement, even if I don't completely believe her.

"What are we going to do?" Mike asks. "Are we still going to the tunnels?"

"Tunnels? The tunnels?" I ask, head snapping over to him. "What are you talking about?"

"We... we were going to buy the others some time. Go and... and burn the vines. Distract the hive mind so El and Hopper could enter the Lab undetected by the demodogs and the others could get the Flayer out of Will." Dustin explains, stuttering a bit. "But now -"

"We're going." I bite out, then stare firmly at the awestruck kids. "We're stopping this shit now. Get whatever we need."

"What about Steve? And..." Lucas gestures to my unconscious ex.

"Hargrove can stay here. But we're bringing Steve."

"C'mon, he didn't even want to come! Just leave him, he's knocked out anyway!" Mike insists, going into panic mode.

"No! He's our strongest player!" Dustin insists. I throw him a wounded look. "You know you are, too, but he's got more muscle."

"Hargrove beat the shit out of him!"

"Only 'cause he hit him with a *goddamn plate!*" Dustin defends, and I nearly melt at how protective he's getting over Steve.

"He's -"

"Michael Wheeler." Mike shuts up and looks at me. I narrow my eyes and furrow my brows. "Steve is coming with us."

"Guys, there's another problem. We don't have a car." Lucas reminds us.

"Steve's is at the tracks." Dustin points out, and I shake my head.

"We don't have time."

"What about the one outside?" Mike offers.

"That's... that's Bob's car, outside. The keys are..." I trail off and focus on Steve instead, then remember something he told me last year.

I slide away from him and paw around in Billy's jean pockets before I find the keys to the Camaro. Spinning to stare up at where Max is standing, I smirk and toss them her way.

"Speed, scratch it, I don't care. Just get us to those tunnels. I'm sure one of you has a map to it."

"Look, I've only ever driven in a parking lot. Shouldn't you -"

"I'm going to help take care of Steve in the back. It'll be a tight squeeze, but," I shrug, then stand, "we've gotta do this. Get moving, kiddos." I order.

---

In a mad dash we've gathered everything we need - gasoline tanks, hoses to spray down the vines easier, rope, masks ("Flannel won't work, trust me!" I had yelled to the kids, reminding them of the mess I'm in now, and they all nodded in understanding).

It takes a little time to get Steve in the back of Billy's car, but we manage to get him half on a struggling Mike while the rest of his weight falls onto me. The younger Wheeler is also carefully holding a tank of gasoline, and it sloshes around when Max starts the car and backs away from the house dangerously fast. I distract myself by pressing an ice-pack to the bump on Steve's forehead. I try to be gentle about it, hand shaking, then look ahead at Max as she turns the car onto the road. "Has... how long has Billy been like that?" I

ask, but she just focuses on the road.

"Since I've known him. He's worse now. I-I thought it'd be different tonight, with you there. I'm sorry. I made it worse."

"No, no Max. That isn't on you. It's better that I... that I know what he's like when I'm not around."

"I'm sorry." Dustin whispers, and I blink over at him in confusion.

"What are you sorry for?"

"I... I thought I should keep it to myself. You were so happy with him, and I... I didn't want to ruin that." He bites his lip and looks down. "On Halloween Mike, Lucas and I were biking home, an-and. And Billy. He, he tried. He tried to run us over."

"What?" I whisper, voice dangerously quiet. "He tried to do what?"

"Run us over." Mike confirms. I stare at him, until Lucas speaks up.

"He attacked me. Back in the house. He told Max to stay away from me, because..."

I look at Lucas, really look, then whisper a soft, "Oh." I reach in front of me with my free hand to take Lucas's shoulder, and he twists to look back at me. "He's a dick, and I can't believe I actually liked him. I can't believe I was so blind."

"Veronica, stop. The Billy you were with... that's who I always wished he was. I think you do - did - make him better, but that monster you saw back there is who he's become."

"I wasn't trying to make him better." I tell Max, who sends me a small smile.

"You just have that effect on him." She responds.

I squeeze Lucas's shoulder again. "You listen to me, Luke. That asshole is *nothing* compared to you. Got it?" Lucas nods vigorously. "No one gets away with saying that shit to you. I'll take care of it."

"Thanks, Huntress." Lucas whispers, and I wink at him.

*These are my kids - Max now included - and I'll be damned if I let an asshole like Billy Hargrove hurt them again.*

My brother snuffles beside me, and I notice his head is still ducked down. "I should have told you, but you were so happy. You hadn't been that happy in so long." He mutters mournfully. I shake my head.

"D." I twist in my seat, Steve's head falling onto my shoulder-blade, ice-pack on his lap. With a sigh I lift Dustin's chin, his wet blue eyes staring straight into my green. "You're my little brother, and I love you more than anything. Your safety and life means more to me than some admittedly attractive guy I just met. So no matter how happy someone makes me, you're the most important person in my life. You make me happy, Chewie."

"Okay."

"I'm sorry you thought you'd be ruining things. I'm sorry you felt you couldn't tell me what had happened." I apologize, then tuck some curls behind his ears and adjust his crooked cap. "No more lies. No more secrets. Between either of us. Capiche?"

"Capiche." He smiles at me. I kiss his cheek sloppily then slowly return to my original position, holding the ice-pack to Steve's plate injury.

As Max follows Lucas's directions and we jump over a pothole, Steve starts to groan and shift his weight. He's head is already in Mike's direction when he begins to wake up. "Nancy?" He asks, and I peer over him to watch the older teen blinking rapidly.

Okay, he's definitely concussed.

Mike throws him an offended look and I snort. It catches Steve's attention, and his head lolls towards me, a dreamy smile on the bruised but handsome face. "Hey, Ronniekins. Are you a dream?" I lower my eyebrows in confusion, but blush at how in awe he sounds. "You're a good dream. Always. Love your eyes, Ronniekins. So green. Like emeralds. *You're gorgeous.*" He mumbles, then closes his eyes and

groans. Max accelerates and they blink open abruptly, still a little hazy but getting clearer. He groans and tries to touch his face.

"Steve, no." I hold the ice-pack on another bruise while Dustin reaches over me to lower his hand.

"Don't touch it." Steve groans and his head shifts onto my chest, the back of his head pressed against my collarbone, right by my rapidly-beating heart. "Hey, buddy." Dustin shushes Steve as he tries to start talking. "It's okay, you put up a good fight. He kicked your ass, but you put up a good fight. But you're okay." I elbow Dustin in the side, then wince at the throbbing from my ribs at the movement. Actually, my whole left side is pulsing from the bruising and Steve's weight, but that's the least of our worries right now.

As Steve groans, Lucas speaks up. "Okay, you're gonna keep straight for half a mile, then make a left on Mount Sinai."

"What's going on?" Steve mumbles, then his attention shifts to Max behind the wheel. She frowns at him. "Oh my God!" He starts to panic.

"Steve, just relax. She's driven before."

"Yeah, in a parking lot!" Mike argues with Dustin, and I stare up at the roof of the car in exasperation.

"That counts!" Lucas shoots back, and I sigh.

As Steve panics more, Dustin shushes him. "They were gonna leave you behind."

"Oh my God."

"But we promised you'd be cool." I shoot Dustin a raised eyebrow. "Fine, I promised. Leia knew you were going to panic. But she wanted you to come, anyway."

"Whoa, whoa, whoa, whoa. What's going on?" Steve stammers, voice heavy with a lisp. Max accelerates, but I've been in this car with Billy before so I'm used to it going fast. Steve is obviously not. "Oh, my God. No! Whoa! Stop the car. Slow down."

"I told you he'd freak out!" Mike yells over Steve's panicking.

I glare at him. "Shut up, Mike!" He gives me an offended look, then rolls his eyes when I narrow my own.

"Stop the car!"

"Everybody shut up!" Max screams. "I'm trying to focus!"

Wincing at the volume, I turn my attention on the wiggling-out "Steve, honey, hey." He blinks up at me, mouth parted. "It's fine." We fly down the road, going over yet another pothole, and Steve shouts, grimacing a bit. "I know it hurts, but we're going to be fine. Just try and stay calm."

"Oh. Wait, that's Mount Sinai. Make a left!" Lucas announces.

"What?"

"Eyes on the road, Max!" I order, and she looks back ahead.

"Make a left!" Lucas orders, and the tires screech as Max takes a sharp turn down Mount Sinai, hitting a mailbox in the process and hopping the curve. All the guys scream, and I blink at Lucas when his pitch hits Erica-high, all shrill and girly. In any other situation, it would have been funny.

No, it's still funny. I laugh over the screams, Max joining. Steve throws me look of disbelief, then goes right back to panicking with the others.

The rest of the ride to the tunnel entrance goes like that - the boys screaming while I attempt to help Max navigate, Lucas otherwise occupied. Finally, we reach our destination - Merrill's Pumpkin Patch - and Max drifts slightly into a smooth stop, cutting the engine. Thankfully the boys finish screaming, and Mike breathes out in fascination. "Incredible."

"Told you. *Zoomer*." Max responds, and I don't understand the reference.

We all climb out of the car, my ribs mercifully no longer throbbing



when the weight is removed from them. I breathe in the fresh air, coughing a little thanks to how aggressive the action is.

As the kids open the trunk and grab what they need - Mike handing me my quiver and bow - Steve climbs out and rubs at the unwounded side of his forehead. He groans a bit as we pull our masks over our mouths as well as random goggles we'd found in the Byers house.

I'm the only one who doesn't put either on. I'm already mutated, no amount of protection is gonna reverse that.

Steve throws himself onto the Camaro, between the passenger seat and its door, grunting and groaning. "Oh, no. Guys. Hey, where do you think you're going?" He asks Mike as the younger male walks past him towards the giant hole next to us. "What are you, deaf? Hello?!" He shouts, and I watch Mike attach the thick coil of rope to the bottom of Billy's car. "We are not going down there right now. I made myself clear!" He grinds out, but Max and Lucas evade his reach as they follow Mike. "Hey, there's no chance we're going to that hole, alright? This ends right now!" He shouts, rushing over to the trunk and shoving whatever Dustin's holding back in.

"Steve, you're upset, I get it!" Dustin tells the older guy, who stops in his tracks. "But the bottom line is, a party member requires assistance and it is our duty to provide that assistance. Now, I know you promised Nance and Jonathan you would keep *us* safe." Dustin briefly looks at me before refocusing on Steve. "So keep us safe." He orders, then hands Steve his backpack and nail-bat, following after his friends. I smile at my brother as he passes me, then silently help Steve put on his backpack. I wince with him when I have to help secure the mask and goggles to his face, and he pokes at me.

"What about you."

"I'm already a mutant, Steve." I gently remind him, winking. He nods.

"And you're... you're okay? Did he hurt you?"

I bite my lip. "Just my ribs. It was an accident. *I* wasn't the one he meant to hurt." I bite, remembering everything Billy had told me about his mom and dad, weeks ago when I was blind to who I was

with.

"Where is he know?"

"Byers house, knocked out. Max." He just nods along, not needing further explanation. "We're over. I'll probably have to remind him, but... I can't be with someone like that." Steve nods, again, and I carefully wrap my arms around his middle, head buried in his chest. His own covered head bends down over mine. "I'm so sorry, Steve. I should've stopped him."

"I shouldn't have let him get to me." Steve lets me go, stepping back and pointing to the hole. "C'mon, who knows what those little shits'll get up to without us." He walks away from me and I slam the trunk closed, Billy's words ringing in my head.

*"He was surprised you picked Wheeler, given how much you love her."*

And even with how tense the situation is, how my skin itches with the Upside Down being so close, my lips mold into a happy smile. If tonight's the most honest Billy's ever been with me, logically that *little* admission wasn't a lie.

I straighten my back, though, and roll my shoulders before following the rest of our group to the hole. Steve gestures for me to go ahead of him, and I hold onto the rope to repel down.

It feels... strange... being completely in the Upside Down again. Or sort-of Upside Down. I'm not walking in two worlds, just under one existing between another? I don't know, I'm not the scientist in the family.

Steve's the last to drop down from the hole. He grunts then looks around. "Holy shit." I snort and he looks down at me. "This is what you've been dealing with?" I nod. "*Jesus*, Roni."

I watch the white flecks around, shrugging the whole time. "I'd say it grows on you, but, that'd be a lie."

"Uh, yeah, I'm pretty sure it's this way!" Mike announces, and Steve and I walk towards the others.

"You're pretty sure, or you're certain?" Dustin sasses, and I hit him up the head.

"I'm 100% sure! Just follow me and you'll know."

Mike tries to lead the way, but Steve stops him. "Whoa, whoa, whoa. Hey, hey, hey, hey. I don't think so. Any of you little shits die down here, I'm getting the blame. Got it, dipshit? From here on out, I'm leading the way. Come on, let's go. Shit!" He yelps, and I rush forward to see vines moving towards us. Before anyone can stop me I push myself in front of the group.

The vines halt, squirming around like they're confused. Completely bamboozled. Then they slither away, like kids who just got in trouble for stealing cookies from the cookie jar. I grin and turn around, facing my small gathering. "Let's move."

"What about the map?" Mike calls after me as we walk down the tunnel, and without even turning around I visibly point to myself.

"I *am* the map, Mike."

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I'm not sure exactly how long we walk for, but I'm confident in where we're going. And even if I weren't, Mike's reluctant confirmations of my accuracy are all I need to mentally repeat "I told you so" *every time* he or Lucas doubts me.

Mostly I'm just listening to the goosebumps on the back of my neck. I figure that the hub - since it's the nerve center - will give off the most danger.

I'm also hoping that the Flayer is distracted - he may not be able to see me, but he can probably tell if a bunch of people are storming his secret tunnels.

Okay, that came out wrong. My apologies.

I make another turn, stopping for a moment in a small crossroads, dark and damp. The others gather behind me, trying to stay clear of slithering vines. "Whoa." I hear Lucas exhale.

"What is this place? Veronica?" Max asks.

"I have absolutely no idea. But we're going that way." I point to the closest tunnel to our left, leading the charge.

"You positive?" Lucas questions.

I don't turn around when I address him - and the group. "The next person to ask me that will end up getting shot with an arrow." I sing out, but fumble when my neck prickles violently. As soon as I'm warned my brother screams under his mask and I rush back to where he's fallen on all fours, coughing into his mask under a, well, it looks like a giant boob, alright.

"Shit, D, are you okay?" I panic, forcing his head up to look at me.

He keeps coughing, then pushes me aside dramatically. "It's in my mouth! Some got on my mouth! *Shit!*" He screeches, and I make him look at me again. His goggles have some gross residue on them just like his mask, but both his nose and mouth are covered. He pants but calms down. "I'm okay."

I huff and help him stand, the others as unamused as I am.

"You serious?"

"Very funny, man. Nice, very nice."

"Jesus, what an idiot." Max and Steve gripe back and forth, and I whistle.

"Hey, you two, lay off him! You two," I point and Lucas and Mike, who seem flummoxed by my tone, "relax and stop back-seat navigating. And *you*," I point at Dustin, "quit being so *fucking* dramatic." I order, sounding scarily like my mom. "Congrats, Dusty, you get to walk the rest of the way with me."

I tug him by his elbow, taking the lead once again while the others follow after us a lot quieter than before. I lead them further down the proverbial rabbit hole until all of my neck is prickling, overheated and bumpy. Stopping at the end of our chosen tunnel, I look around. It's larger than the previous crossroads room, and it's giving me bad

vibes, and only bad vines.

"Looks like we found your hub, Wheeler." Steve comments, and I nod in agreement.

"Let's drench it." Mike viciously suggests, and with that we get down to business. I spray at the vines, which is somewhat difficult considering they keep moving out of the way when I get closer, but I eventually manage to make a trail all around the circumference of the hub.

Steve gets the ceiling with Mike, Dustin takes the right side, and Max and Lucas take the left. We're all panting by the time we're done, tossing the empty canisters and tanks of gasoline aside.

Before anyone speaks, I take my knife from its sheath and slice the bottom of my very-ripped sweater, wrapping the cloth around an arrowhead and dousing it in a small puddle of gasoline.

"C'mon, Steven. Light me up." I grin down at where the older teen is crouched beside me, having already braced himself to toss away his beloved zippo.

"I am in such deep shit." He murmurs to himself, but nevertheless flicks on the small flame and holds it to the very flammable arrowhead. With a smirk I notch it, aiming for the center of the hub, where the vines have gathered, uncomfortably wet.

A quote from *The Merry Adventures of Robin Hood* comes to mind as I release the arrow and it strikes true in the heart of the withering vines. *"Strike no man without need, for I would fain avoid bloodshed, but if ye do strike, strike hard, and see that there be no need to strike again."*

While the others shield their eyes from the blazing heat, I refuse to. I watch with satisfaction as the vines shriek and burn in pain, the fire spreading around the hub as the tendrils try to move away from it. I'm imagining the Mind Flayer shrieking, too, overheated by our efforts, as well as the people in Hopper's mysterious cabin. Here's hoping he's released Will from his possession, to shocked by his pain and the prospect of being bested by a primitive species to keep holding on.

"Roni, we need to move." Steve mutters in my ear.

I still don't look away. "Give me a moment."

A large hand slides into my own, lacing our fingers together. I look up Steve, my mouth parted in surprise. He just stares at me, mouth and eyes far too covered for me to see his expression. "Your moment's up. We need to go."

"Alright." I whisper, then rush ahead, his hand still entwined with mine.

As we run through the tunnels, I keep looking behind me to make sure the kids are staying close and nothing's following. My neck is still tingling, warning me of incoming, but I don't know where said incoming is going to pop up. Until I hear dogs growling in the distance. Then I know we really need to move.

Then Mike screams, and we all stop and turn.

The younger Wheeler's on the ground, ankles bound by a vine attempting to pull him away. Letting go of Steve's hand in my haste to help my best friend's little brother, the vine shrinks away from Mike and I help him up. The others rush over to check in on us, talking over each other. They're silent by a growl, and we all look to the right. There, right at the tunnel we have to take, is a demodog, screeching dangerously at us. It bends down like it's about to pounce, and I notice the strip of yellow on its back.

"Dart." Dustin says, getting the demodog's attention. We try to pull him back as he advances on the monster, but he shushes us. I grab Steve's hand again while taking a step towards Dustin. "Shh. Stop it."

"Dustin, get back." Max pleads.

"Trust me, please." Dustin doesn't look back at us, and my heart clenches in fear the further he gets. Steve follows after me just as carefully, squeezing my hand with his own.

Dart the demodog paws closer to my brother, meeting him in the middle. Dustin's arm comes up, and then his voice is clearer and his hat is shoved further back on his head.

The idiot took off his mask and goggles. Shit, I'm gonna kill him.

"Hey. It's me, it's me. It's just your friend, it's Dustin." Dustin says soothingly, crouching down. "You remember me?" He asks, kneeling a bit. "Will you let us pass?"

I jump when Dart snarls, flowerhead open and teeth exposed to my brother. The others shout, too, Steve holding onto my hand even tighter.

I don't mind. I'm holding on tighter, too.

"Okay, okay, I'm sorry." Dustin responds, voice calm and even. Dart begins to settle, and I become a touch more relieved. "I'm sorry about the storm cellar. That was a pretty douchey thing to do. You hungry? Yeah?" He asks, then starts to remove his backpack.

"He's an idiot." Mike whispers, and I smile when Lucas shushes him and Max orders him to just shut up.

Dustin's got this. If anyone can wrangle an interdimensional beast, it's him.

"I've got our favorite. See? Nougat." He holds up what I know is a Three Musketeers bar.

*Oh. Dart. D'Artagnan. I get it.*

Dustin opens the crinkly wrapper, and the demodog creeps closer. "Look at that. Yummy. Here, alright?" He reaches down to drop some pieces in front of the creature. "Eat up, buddy. *Come on, come on.*" He gestures for us to walk around them. The other three kids go ahead of us, then Steve pulls me after him. I force the two of us to stop, though, my heart breaking for Dustin as he stares sadly at his demogorgon pet. "There's plenty, I've got more." He leaves the rest of the nougat for Dart and stands up, sling his bag back onto his back. He walks over to me and takes my hand holding the bow, his other lowering his goggles and straightening his cap. "Goodbye, buddy."

Dart chitters and stares up my brother, then returns to his candy. Dustin shudders, knowing Dart'll die when the gate is closed. I do my best to squeeze his hand, then watch as he lifts his mask.

"Let's go, let's go." Steve whispers and I nod, holding onto him while Dustin holds onto me.

The closer we get to our only exit, the closer the growls get and the worse my neck prickles. The tunnels rumble and shake, like they're about to collapse.

*The gate. She's doing it, El's closing the gate.*

"Hurry up! Come on, you first Roni!" Steve shouts when we right ourselves. He boosts me up through the hole, and I set down my bow to help pull Max out. She quickly thanks me, and we grab Lucas by the arms to haul him up, followed by Mike.

I'm just reaching down to grab Dustin when they pause, the demodogs getting too close. I start to panic, reaching for my bow to drop down and help them, but the three kids stop me.

"No, no, let go of me! Dustin, Steve! Come on, get up here!" I scream, and Dustin looks up at me while Steve gets his bat at the ready. He doesn't have a chance to say anything, the hoard of demon dogs jumps into view. My mouth opens in a silent cry, eyes wide with fear

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And the demodogs pay no mind to the two guys I love most in this world. They just dash around them, and Steve lifts Dustin with one arm, turning so my little brother avoids the monsters.

I swear I fall a little more in love with him.

"Eleven." Mike mutters, still grabbing onto me. I nod in agreement, eyes never leaving the hole.

When the last demodog disappears, Steve is hurriedly boosting Dustin up. We drag my little brother out of the hell hole and I toss my bow aside to run my hands all over him, checking that he's really alive. He stops my frantic hand movements and latches onto me, the both of us shuddering.

Steve pants from behind us, and I look over my shoulder to see him brushing off the grime and slime of the tunnels.



Ignoring his extensive injuries, the minute I reach him I slap the older teen across the face. He yelps in pain and I jump up, arms wrapped around his neck as my whole body vibrates with danger and adrenaline and the fear of Steve and Dustin really being dead -

"Screw you, Steven Harrington! Screw you!" I yell, tears rolling down my cheeks. There's a thud next to us and then one arm is wrapped around the small of my back, mindful of my bruises as his hand settles on my hip. The other rests behind my neck, holding me close. Reassuring me that he's here, that he and Dustin both made it out.

He stumbles back a bit, and I twist my head back only to be temporarily blinded by Billy's headlights turning on and getting brighter, what the fuck?

The others' flashlights are growing bolder, too, our vision flooded with an intense white light. Steve forces my head back into his neck.

The brighter the light glows, the more the goosebumps spread on my body, skin itching worse than ever before. It's hard to say how long it lasts, but Steve holds me through it the whole time, my body shivering uncontrollably.

And then, just like when you flip a switch, it all stops. The headlights turn back off, the brightness of the flashlights recede, and I stop shaking.

Steve sets me down and steps back a little, removing his goggles and mask. I just look around, eyes stopping at the tunnel entrance and hand covering my mouth.

It all stopped. My skin stopped itching, the goosebumps disappeared, and any hint of the Upside Down being near is gone. I feel no connection to what's beneath us. I feel... I feel like me again. I'm free.

"Oh my God. *Oh my God.*" I gasp, uncovering my mouth and staring back at the group, eyes filling with tears of joy rather than pain, my heart no longer clenching in fear, and a wide grin splitting my face open.

"Roni, are you okay?" Steve asks, tone laced with worry as he and the

others reach me. He takes my hands in his, gentle and *lovingly*.

I shake my head, laughing. Really laughing, not the nervous hysterical one I do or the one I perfected to make my friends think I was alright. It's all me, giggles and chortles and little gasps for air. "I feel better than okay. I'm free."

Still, I'm not naive to how it happened, why my powers were... *leech*ed away. I stare off into the distance, and pray my freedom didn't cost the price of a little girl, and a boy far too innocent for this world.

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Wow, a note at the end of the chapter? Strange.

Okay, I just want to clarify something since it would've been a spoiler to do so in the beginning - when Billy physically hurts Veronica, *it's an accident*. She inserted herself in a violent situation, and if any of you have ever been in or tried to stop a fight, no one comes out without some kind of injury. And when he squeezes her in the kitchen, that's also accidental in terms of him not checking his own strength in the moment - he was definitely being grossly possessive, but his intent *wasn't* to harm her. What's important to remember is he stops moving immediately after. It's not something that will go unmentioned, so don't worry about me brushing that aside. Look, Billy is obviously many things - even in the beginning I never wanted to erase the fact that he's a minor antagonist in Season 2, and clearly problematic - I personally love to hate him, but that's just me. Still; there will be more character development for him. He won't be two-dimensional, and he's going to not only be put in his place but also be made to evolve as a human. So no bashing me or anything - humans can be awful, but sometimes they learn to be better.

I'm also not excusing the rest of his behavior in this chapter, and the previous one. I just wanted to clear the air about the rib situation.

Okay, that's all. The next chapter will be posted soon!

## 18. Hello and Goodbye, Blue Monday

Hi all, and welcome to my *Stranger Things* Steve Harrington/OC story! It's been a long, long time coming. Seriously. Since 2017 long.

In this story, we've got the Ice Queen of Hawkins, the older-but-shorter-by-season 2 sister of Dustin Henderson, because he deserves an older sibling. She's Veronica, and even though *Heathers* came out in 1989 I've taken the liberty of borrowing some of my favorite quotes because *Winona Ryder Easter Eggs*. Seriously, I cannot overstate my love for that movie. Anyway, there's more of a backstory for the Henderson family, including adding the dad to the "asshole fathers club", co-president with Lonnie Byers, the prick. Expect explicit language because, hello, *Stranger Things* isn't known for censoring language.

Since I'm all about expanding the story and seeing what happens to our characters between seasons, there isn't going to be a straight jump to the Snow Ball dance and then season 3. Here's all the "break chapters" as I call them, since they take place between seasons. This one directly follows the tunnels, with the groups all meeting back up at the Byers house. Veronica and Steve have a bunch of cute moments together, and it's really just filler and tying up loose ends from the previous update. Veronica and Billy also have a very important conversation in this chapter. The next one will likely be up in a couple of days - I'm striving have it done and up on 11/04. There are obviously emotional moments in this one, but the next will be focused on the anniversary of Barb's death and Veronica's disappearance, since in the show timeline it's on the 8th (four days after the Mind Flayer got evicted from Will's body and El closed the gate). So, yeah, be prepared for that. There'll be more scenes beyond that, but for the most part it'll be focused on Veronica and Nancy mourning Barb, Veronica dealing with the actual Anniversary Effect. Steve will also have a POV moment, involving Nancy and Jonathan as they remember the fact they almost lost Veronica that day, too.

After that, we'll make everything a little more cheerful and upbeat since it'll be the Thanksgiving chapter, as well as Veronica's 17th birthday. Will there be more Steronica moments? Veve? Which do we like for a ship name? What would you suggest? Anyway, there definitely will be because at this point, you know I'm all about that relationship. After that chapter we've got the Snow Ball as well as two scenes I've been working on for awhile. Both are positive in their own way, so don't worry about that drama. I've tortured the characters enough. I'm also going to move up the timeline of El and Max's friendship because it's so pure and beautiful and I need the two of them to bond with each other as well as Nancy and Veronica. Girl's night is an important part of life.

Fun fact: the title of this chapter is a mashup of the Beatles 'Hello/Goodbye' as well as Kurt Vonnegut's *Breakfast of Champions, or Goodbye Blue Monday*. You know, in case you were curious lol.

Enjoy the story! I only own Veronica.

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We don't stick around Merrill's Pumpkin Patch for longer than we have to, all of us coming down from the adrenaline and needing to know everyone else is alright. If Will and El are alright.

Not trusting Steve to not crash the Camaro - he *definitely* has a confusion - I sit behind the wheel, spinning away from the empty clearing and back to the Byers house. And shit, we still have to deal with my knocked-out ex, and we need to get Steve's car, and -

"Veronica, you okay?" Steve asks, and I feel a weight on my right hand. I don't need to look down at it to know Steve's holding it, my own limbs clutching the steering wheel in a vice-like grip. "You're shaking."

"Yeah, and you got beat up." He huffs. "What? I thought we were stating the obvious."

"Will Billy still... be there when we get back?" Max speaks up from the back, squeezed between Mike and Lucas.

I shrug. "Probably. The sedative you gave him seemed strong enough. We haven't even been gone that long. Only... *shit*, almost two hours? Crap, your parents are going to *kill* me when I get you home, and they didn't even know I had you!"

"Please. We'll just blame Harrington." Lucas announces, and I laugh at the offended noise Steve makes.

"Hey, watch it, asshole." Is all Steve warns, but he lets it go.

I make the turn into the Byers house, and as we fly up the driveway I note that the only other car here is Bob's.

I cut off the engine but leave the key in the ignition, jumping out of the car. Steve slides the passenger seat forward to release the four monster-fighting kids, all of whom groan and stretch as they traipse up the porch steps. Steve and I follow them in a comfortable, tired silence, making sure to grab everyone's shit from the trunk.

I twist the knob, having kept the door unlocked in our haste to get to the hub. It's not like anyone would actually come out here to steal anything from the Byers family. Billy's right where we left him, knocked out and drooling on the floor. A small part of me's very conflicted - I liked him, you know? Or still like him, I guess. He was honest with me at a time when the people closest to me weren't. He cares for me - I know he does - and he looked out for me this past week. But now... a larger part of me can't stand to look at the monster he hid away.

I catch Steve watching us, and give him a small smile. "I'm going to get him in the car, I guess. I'll wake him up when Max is ready to go." I lean down to grab a limp, muscular arm, and suddenly he becomes easier to lift. My eyes flick up to see Steve supporting most of my ex's weight, not saying a word.

Together we manage to half-carry/half-drag Billy out of the house and into his car. "We'll have to come up with something to tell him." Steve reminds me as we gently close the door.

"He won't be asking questions. If he does, I'll figure it out."

Steve sighs and rubs at his forehead, wincing when he touches his bruise. I lower his hand and squeeze it, the older teen staring at it. "He won't go after you, right?" He finally asks as I reach out to open the front door.

I look back at the Camaro. "No."

"How can you be so sure?" Steve whispers, voice tinged with fear.

"Because he told me he wouldn't." I look up at Steve, who glances down at my torso. "That was an accident." He snorts. "No, it was. Well, the squeezing was him being aggressively possessive, but it wasn't like he meant to do it. And, well, I put myself in the fight. Only an idiot would expect to come out of one unmarked. I'm not an idiot."

Steve holds up his hands in mock-surrender and I roll my eyes, reentering the house with the older teen right behind me.

The kids are in the kitchen, sitting at the table with big glasses of water. Stomach starting to growl more audibly, I decide to check the freezer for some ice cream - I goddamn earned it.

I don't find any tubs of ice cream in it, though. Or even a TV dinner. Instead, I scream like a banshee, quickly slamming it closed and panting. "Which one of you assholes decided to put *a demodog in the freezer?!?*" I whisper yell, back pressed against the large kitchen appliance. Steve points to my brother, who give me a nervous chuckle. "Why?!"

"For, uh, science."

I narrow my eyes and point at him. "Well, find a new science project. I'm burning this one. Jesus, Dustin, what if Joyce found it instead?" He looks a little guilty and I rub my eyes before reopening the freezer and awkwardly grabbing the blanket-covered monster. Steve comes forward to help and I struggle to point at him, somewhat succeeding. "Uh-uh. Nope. *You* are going to be a 'damn good babysitter' and feed the gremlins. *And please*, for the love of *God*, do *not* help my brother hide another interdimensional monster. 'For science'. Jesus Christ, I'm surrounded by *dumbasses*." I gripe, and a flash of red means Max is

following me out.

I wait a moment for the Mayfield girl opens the back door for me, then follow after her. We quietly walk past the shed to an empty area in the backyard and I dump the demodog - blanket and all - on the ground, wrinkling my nose at the slime sticking to the ripped sleeves of my unfixable sweater. Seriously, this is getting trashed as soon as I get home.

"You're really okay, right? Your sides?" Max asks as we swiftly dig out a pit, surrounding it with rocks then tossing our sacrifice in the circle.

"Yeah. I mean they're definitely bruised, but nothing's broken. I would know." She tilts her head. "It worse last year. My injuries, I mean. I got fucked up by the Demogorgon twice."

"Oh." She hands me a box of matches. "Swiped them from the kitchen, in case we needed them for the... for the tunnels."

I light a match and drop it down on the blanket, the material catching fire quick and spreading all around. "Has it hit you yet? All of this crazy?"

Max shakes her head. "No. It just feels like today's been a dream."

I make a noise of agreement. "Holy shit, it's only been a day. Well, a little over."

"My mom's gotta be worried sick."

"Should I wake Billy now? Send you both home?"

Max shakes her head. "No. I need to know Will's okay. That Eleven really closed the gate. I don't want to go home thinking this isn't over."

I smile affectionately and nod. "Okay. But... Neil won't be mad? Your stepdad?"

She breathes in sharply then glances up at me, eyes narrowed. "Billy told you?"

"Yeah. He did. And I... right now I can't stand him, but I don't want either of you to go home if it means a different kind of trouble."

"I'll be fine, Veronica. And I'll... I'm going to tell Neil it was all on me. That I just wanted to go exploring and ended up lost. Billy found me and got me some food, first, because I was hungry and he was being a good brother." She practically hisses out, and I nod, watching the demodog burn away. "I'm not doing it for him, though. He could've hurt Lucas. He could've killed Steve."

"That's okay. You need to protect yourself from Neil. Who knows if he'll snap at you instead."

"I'm not doing it for me, either. I'm doing it for you."

"Max -"

She shakes her head, cutting me off. "No. *You saved me*, you saved all of us tonight. I got you hurt by calling you. I thought Billy would've calmed down if he saw you. He cares about you, even though he's a complete dick." I sigh. "Plus, you know, you aren't like the other girls he was with. You... I mean, you bothered to remember my name."

"To be fair, he did tell me a little bit about you."

"Nothing good, I suppose."

I shrug. "Doesn't matter."

"Yeah, well, I'm sure he just called me Maxine. But you... you guessed that I prefer Max. Thank you."

I smile at her and throw an arm around her shoulders, the fire starting to die out. "No problem. And hey, if Billy ever tries anything - even though he said he wouldn't - or your stepdad pulls some shit, or you need a break from the boys, you can come to mine anytime. We'll have 'girls night' weekly, with Nancy and El."

"She doesn't like me very much. Eleven." Max frowns. "I don't know what I did."

"Max, hey," warm blue eyes meet my green, "she's spent the year



alone with just Hopper for company. Before that, she, well. She didn't have a normal childhood. Just, uh, give her a chance to warm up to you. She will. I promise. Just be patient, Mad Max."

She nods, and the rumble of an approaching car makes us straighten. With matching grins we leave the crispy hellhound behind and rush into the house, just as Hopper and El storm in. While Mike latches onto the girl I hug Hopper, still pissed but relieved he's still around for me to be pissed at.

"You're okay!" I smile into his chest, and he pats my back.

"Yeah, yeah. We're both fine. And you? Do you feel connected to that place still?"

"No." I shake my head and step back, smiling. "Thanks to El." I grin at the girl who rushes over to me, holding tight. "I'm so *proud* of you sweetheart. You did good. You did really, really good."

"Christ, Harrington, what the hell happened to your face?" Hopper gruffs out. "Let's just say Roni over there knows how to pick 'me. I would've looked way worse if the shit we dealt with in the tunnels didn't - oh, shit." Steve mutters as I motion for him to shut up, lacking a filter from exhaustion.

"That explains the kid drooling in his - I'm sorry. What tunnels?" Hopper turns to face me, and I smile innocently. He groans. "Tell me you didn't."

"It bought you time." I shrug. "It felt great. Besides, *I* remembered to bring backup when I decided to go to vine-ville."

"It was our idea!" Dustin whines.

The Chief rolls his eyes then looks at all. "We should get you kids home. I'm sure your parents are beyond concerned. That'll be great to deal with." He complains.

"Not until we see Will." Lucas argues, standing firm with the rest of the Party behind him.

"Okay." Hopper shrugs. "They'll be here soon. Nancy radioed me 15

minutes ago, to warn their battery was about to die. Harrington," I watch him refocus on Steve, "do you want to press charges against Camaro-boy?"

Steve looks at me, and I shrug. It's his decision to make - he's the one who got beat to a pulp. "No." He finally decides, and I raise an eyebrow as he sends me a soft smile. "He's the one who lost."

"How? You're the one who got knocked out! Your face is, like, a mess!" Mike comments, not getting it.

I do, though. *I'm not an idiot.*

Max and Dustin seem to get it, too, because they snort at his reaction and what I'm sure is the lovesick grin on my face.

Hopper looks between Steve and us, then runs a hand down his face. "Jesus, I need a pot of coffee."

"Make that two pots." I stifle a yawn, El leaning her wait against my right side. "Maybe there are Eggos here, too. I promised you Eggos last year."

"You said 'All the Eggos.'" She reminds me, tone serious.

I bite my lip as Hopper huffs. "Kid, I've given you enough for a lifetime."

"No." I can hear her glaring at him and I struggle to hide my life. The urge to do so fades when another engine rumbles outside, the beat-up car squeaking to a stop.

The kids and I don't hesitate. In a mad dash we race out the door, pushing and shoving our way out of the narrow doorway and into the dark night. Well, very early morning.

The first person I hug is Nancy, and we cling to each other so tightly it takes Jonathan and Steve to ease us apart so that my brother can lift me into his arms, twirling me through the air and crying into my shoulder. It's relief and despair all wrapped into one sound, something I mimic as soon as I catch it. "You're okay. You're okay." He mutters, talking to himself as he presses kisses into my forehead.

"Yeah. I'm fine. I told you I would be." I whisper comfortingly, and Jonathan sets me down on the ground only to pull me into yet another hug.

"We-we didn't kn-know for sure. The Mind Flayer, he just... he just left, and we didn't know where he went. I... I thought he might've found you."

"He didn't! He didn't!" I promise, squeezing him around the middle.

"You stayed put, right?" I don't answer. "Right?!"

"We went to the tunnels to buy you time. It worked. We burned those fuckers." I tilt my head up to look at him, frown at the sheer panic in his deep brown eyes. "I didn't go alone. It was a group effort."

He just breathes out through his nose and kisses my forehead. "I'm too tired and happy to be pissed at your stupidity right now."

"Mike! Lucas! Dustin! Max!... Eleven?!" I gasp and stumble back when I hear the exhausted but ecstatic voice, hands covering my mouth when I watch Will running from his mother's arms to his friends, surrounded by his family.

He's here. He made it.

I start to sob quietly, and a strong but lithe arm wraps around my shoulders, pulling me sideways into his body. Jonathan gives me another reassuring smile, his eyes becoming less sad.

I can't hear what the kids are saying, their voices mingling together into one uniform sound, each growing louder than the last. I hide my head in Jonathan's chest while Nancy burrows into me, and I can hear her speaking quietly with Steve.

"Hey, Roni. Looks like someone's trying to talk to you." My temporary pillow whispers, and I move my head from his chest to meet Will's tired but warm chocolate eyes. I unapologetically shove my friends off in order to crash into Will, my arms wrapping around the blanket-covered boy.

"You're here. Oh my God, it worked. It really worked. *You're here.*" I

whisper into his sweaty hair, and he nods, shaking with me.

"*He's gone.* He's *really* gone. I can't feel him anymore. I can't see them, either. The now-memories. What about you? Are you -"

"No tingles, no chills, no 'I've got a bad feeling about this' sparks going off. I'm... Will, we're *free*." We smile at each other, then keep hugging. "Free enough."

"Now we just have nightmares to look forward to."

I snort, soft and friendly. "Oh, *please*."

He giggles into my neck. "Yeah, you're right. What are a few bad dreams compared to this past year?"

"Careful, Will. Things might start to get a little normal for us."

"Normal is good." He whispers, smiling into my skin.

I hold him to me even tighter than before and kiss the top of his head. "We're going to be alright. I've got your back, little brother. *Always*." I promise, and we cling to each other in the dimly-lit driveway, reassuring ourselves that this is all real. That we made it, that our friends - *our family* - saved us.

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I sit behind the wheel of the Beemer, parked in front of the empty Harrington house while Steve runs in to grab a toothbrush and a change of clothes for school tomorrow. His parents aren't home to guiltily fuss over him, and now that this is all finally over I can actually fix up his face with more than a couple of cartoon-print Band-Aids and butterfly bandages.

This is the closest I've gotten to the Harrington house since that night last year. Normally I'd just sit here for a few moments then briskly drive away, but I've got the events of this past week and tonight to distract me.

Dustin's knocked out in the backseat, snoring away. I would've felt bad taking him home if the other kids were staying over at the Byers house, but it's a school night... day... and Joyce and Jonathan need

to be with Will without feeling overwhelmed with guests. So Hopper briefly left El at Will's to drive the kids home, grumpily stopping at the part of the woods where Steve had parked before completing his task.

Before all that, though, I had been given the lovely job of waking Billy back up from his slumber. As soon as he was coherent enough he tried to talk to me, but I just narrowed my eyes in warning, Max harshly ordering him to drive her home. She sent Steve and I a reassuring smile before my ex drove away, leaving the rest of us literally in the dust.

Whatever, I'm covered in slime already.

I sit up when Steve leaves his big house, wearing a sweater and sweatpants, locking the door behind him and returning to the car to toss his shit into the trunk. It slams shut but Dustin keeps snoring away, and Steve winces as he settles into the passenger seat and tugs on his seatbelt. "You sure your mom will be okay with this?"

"Hey, Dustin and I will be grounded anyway if she's still up. And if she isn't... my mom loves you, you'll be fine. We'll be fine. She may even try to drive you to the hospital. Shit, should we be taking you to the hospital?"

"Nothing feels broken."

"Is that a yes?"

"I'm fine, Roni." Steve insists. I huff and tape the steering wheel. "Fine. Just drop me off at Hawkins general. You can leave my car at yours."

"I'm not just going to drop you off." I insist, glaring at him but starting the car. He sends me a small smile and reaches over to squeeze my hand.

"Listen, if I feel worse by the time we get to your house, I'll go. But seriously, aside from the headache and blurry vision I'm fine."

"*Blurry vision?*" I hiss, pulling away from his house and driving down the empty road.

"I've had blurry vision for hours. I'm just tired. I haven't been sleeping great."

"Because of Nancy?" I question, eyes focused ahead so I can make a turn without pulling a Max and destroying private property.

"Because of you."

"Oh." I mutter at his admission, and we lapse into silence. "Sorry."

"You're not the one who has to be sorry." I give him a quick eyebrow raise. "It's on me."

Inhaling sharply, I turn onto Cornwallis. "Halloween." I utter.

"Halloween."

"Look, can we just agree we were both dicks?"

"I was worse. You were just trying to check on me. And I was so wrapped up in my bullshit that I took it out on you. After you'd slipped into the Upside Down, *again*." He growls. "I was the bigger dick."

I keep my crude response to myself, and give his hand a firm squeeze instead. "I was pissed, yeah. But... you weren't wrong. You were very, very right, and you woke me up from my own bullshit. I hadn't been acting like myself for awhile, and you had the balls to tell me it to my face when no one else would."

"I should've told you sooner. Maybe all of this could have been... you wouldn't have felt alone." I carefully pull into my driveway and park behind the *Millenium Falcon*. Turning the engine off, his hand leaves mine to touch under my chin and turn my gaze on him. "I never *ever* want you to feel alone."

"I don't want you too, either." I read him, and his lips twitch. "Yeah, that's right Harrington, I see you, too. *I know you*." I repeat his words from Tina's party back to him, and he grins. "I'll give you the proof later. I'm tired, Harrington."

"Get my bag, I'll wake your brother up." He promises. I shake my

head though, looking at him worriedly.

"No. No, we're going to go inside, I'm going to change, and hopefully my mom is still up so I can let her know I'm taking you to the hospital."

"I thought you said -"

"I'm not taking any chances. We'll say we were hanging out by the quarry and you got jumped... or, Billy said he stopped by to check on me. We can just... it won't be a complete lie." I mumble, feeling guilty about how dishonest I've been with my mother this past year.

He huffs. "Fine. Only because it'll make you feel better."

"Thanks Steve." I smile at him, and he smiles back.

It takes a couple of moments to wake Dustin up and an even longer time to get him out of the car. Despite my twinging sides I manage to carry everything I don't need for school towards the house, Dustin fumbling to get the door open.

When he does, we're greeted by an anxious Claudia Henderson. "Where have you been?! I've been worried sick! You didn't leave a note, you didn't call to say you were going to be - oh, Steve, what happened? Oh, you poor dear." Steve falters a bit at my mom's emotional whiplash, but Dustin and I take full advantage of her distraction to go to our rooms. Dustin and I hug for a solid few minutes before I send the half-asleep boy to bed. My own movements are just as sluggish as I strip and pull on a robe, eager for a shower.

I keep it short, not wanting to leave Steve waiting for too long but also needing to just stop smelling like demodogs and the tunnels. I dry off and make sure to grab a few pills for the morning before creeping back into my room. Black, pink, and white tracksuit on as well as my converse, I grab a smaller duffel and pack a change of clothes for school, my Lady's Choice deodorant, some easy-to-carry makeup, and my brush. My wet curls are held up by a scrunchie and I'm as ready to face the world again as I'll ever be so I make to leave my room, only to stop at briefly at my desk, staring at it like it's on fire.

My mom has Steve resting on the couch when I return, an icepack on his forehead. "What happened?" She asks us, mouth straight and eyes hard.

"Well, uh, Billy... I bite my lip. "Um, I was supposed to meet him tonight, but I lost track of time. So I decided to stay out one more night and just come home early tomorrow. I went out for a walk, and ended up at the quarry. I found him and Steve -"

"Fighting. We were fighting." Steve says, and my mom frowns.

"What about?" Steve and I look at each other and I shrug.

"He didn't say. Neither one of them did. But, well, Steve came out looking worse."

"I thought Billy was looking for his sister? He stopped by here, you know."

"I think he already found her by then." Steve offers, pressing the ice to his forehead. "Yeah, he did."

"Again, what were you two fighting... *oh*." She looks at him, and she nods. "I see."

I narrow my eyes at her in confusion, but she doesn't elaborate so I continue. "Steve said he dropped Dustin off at the Byers house, to go rally the kids and look for Mews. I'm so sorry I wasn't here, mom. Did you find her?" I ask, smoothly changing the subject despite knowing the heartbreaking truth.

My mom snuffles. "No, dumpling. She must have just run off." I reach over and grab her hand.

"I'm sorry." I repeat, and she gives me a wet smile.

"Oh, sweetheart, I'll be okay. I'm sure she'll come back home soon. Now," she clears her throat and dabs under her eyes with a tissue, "are you going to be taking Steve to the hospital?"

I nod and smile. "It's probably a good idea to at least get him checked on. I made sure to stop by his place after we picked up Dustin, so we



both have a change of clothes for tomorrow if we end up needing to stay at the hospital."

"Good, good." She yawns, sniffing a bit. We both stand up and she gives Steve a motherly hug first, followed by me, and I discreetly wince when her arms wrap around my ribs too tightly. "You know, he seemed like bad news anyway." I pull back and stare at her in confusion, but her eyes slyly flick down to my right thumb. "You wouldn't be wearing that if you were still with *him*." With a kiss to my cheek she's walking down the hall to her room, flicking the lights off as she goes.

I turn to look up at Steve, who's gesturing to the front door. I nod and follow after him, grabbing my flight jacket from the coat rack and locking up behind us. Steve gets comfortable in the passenger seat while I toss my duffle bag in the trunk and slam it closed, getting behind the wheel moments later. As I turn the key in the ignition of the Beemer Steve leans his head on the window, looking out into the dark night.

As we drive to the hospital, the gold arrow ring glints under the passing street lights, a comfortable weight on my right thumb.

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Before too long I'm pulling into one of the many free parking spots in front of Hawkins General, Steve and I tiredly climbing out of his Beemer. "What are we telling them again?" He murmurs, yawning a bit as we shuffle towards the entrance, pushing the doors open.

"You were jumped at the quarry. I took you here because I was worried."

"How nice of you." He tiredly sasses, and I laugh sardonically at him as we head to the front desk, where the elderly night receptionist is clicking away on her computer, greying blonde hair pulled up into a slick bun. I don't recognize her, but then again I've been avoiding this place like the plague since they took the stitches out of my forehead. Until now.

I'm starting to realize I'd make a lot of exceptions for Steve.

"Hi. We, uh... need a doctor?" I awkwardly announce, my companion nodding like I didn't just announce the most obvious thing.

The old woman looks up and gasps when she sees Steve. "Oh, you poor boy! Here, if you could just fill out this paperwork I'll find a nurse." She passes a clipboard over to Steve, but I take it instead and lead him over to the vacant waiting area.

I start to fill out his information, Steve leaning his head against my shoulder to read what I've written down - the uninjured side of his head, of course.

"I know for a fact I never told you my middle name." He mutters, and I smile as hand flicks over to his date of birth.

Steven Theodore Harrington, born March 25 of 1966.

"Back in the seventh grade, well, eighth for you, your parents actually went to parent-teacher conference. Your mom was pissed because she found out you and Tommy had been skipping English class. Your dad was mad you got caught." I glance down at him. "Sorry."

"You remembered it because my mom yelled it?"

"Kind of. I also thought it was a super pretentious name at the time. Totally preppy."

"Oh. Huh."

I smile, writing down what had happened. "I've had to physically restrain myself from calling you 'Teddy Bear' ever since. I figured teasing you about it would be stooping to your level."

"Thanks, for taking the higher ground. I never would've lived that shit down." He mutters.

I smile wider and kick his ankle lightly. "Oh, no, don't thank me yet."

"You suck, Veronica."

"I swallow, too." I pause and blush, then clear my throat. Damn, I'd said the same thing to Billy, but somehow saying it to Steve makes

me all flustered. "Uh, I need your blood type."

"A + . Totally ironic, I know, considering my grade."

Snorting, I pass over the allergy section. "You don't have any allergies. Well, you're allergic to good music, but that's it. Right?"

Steve slaps my arm lightly. "Rude. But yes, no allergies. How'd you know?"

"You were bragging about it in my freshman year, because you overheard me and Barb going over our biology homework. I told her how I went into near-fatal anaphylactic shock because my parents and I didn't know I'm allergic to penicillin." I look away, frowning when I think about the friend I'd lost.

"I remember." He mutters. "You told me I was a dick."

"Was I wrong?"

"No. But I didn't mean to be a dick. It was a... I was scared, when I heard it. So I reacted poorly. I'm sorry for the shit I used to pull on you."

I blink at his admission and look down at him, but Steve's refusing to meet my gaze as he keeps staring at the clipboard. "I was a bitch right back. A cold bitch."

"Yeah, well, you had your reasons. How I behaved was one of them."

"You've made up for it, okay? I let that shit go after you swooped into the Byers house and saved me from being Demogorgon-dinner."

"You know what's strange?" He asks, picking his head up to take the clipboard, getting ready to fill out his insurance information. "I don't even remember going back in. I was at my car, ready to leave, then I stopped. Next thing I knew, I heard you scream and then seconds later the bat was in my hand."

"Adrenaline's funky like that." I comment. "Hey, what are you going to tell your parents? They'll find out about this, right?" He's 18, but the insurance is still under his dad's name.

"Yeah. It'll fucking suck. I'll just say I got jumped. Dad'll want to press charges for the attention, mom'll cry about it, but then dad'll have to go away for another conference or whatever, and mom'll follow him because staying with that dick is obviously way more important than me. They'll forget all about this, then." He bitterly announces, pen scratching violently into the last page. I reach over and squeeze his free left hand where it's clenching the clipboard. He glances down at our entwined limbs and visibly calms down. No words need to be exchanged.

I take the clipboard from him to return it to the receptionist, who promises a nurse is on her way. I sit back down next to Steve, this time resting my head on his shoulder. We wait only a few more minutes before nurse Ellen introduces herself, leading us further into the hospital and into a room.

She gets Steve comfortable on the bed, and we answer her questions as clearly as possible, given our state. I get more and more relieved as she checks Steve's vitals and announces - aside from his obvious state - that he's going to be "a-okay."

"That doesn't mean you shouldn't be here, sweetheart. You're lucky to have a girlfriend so worried about you." She pats his shoulder and powers on before either one of us can correct her. "Now, Dr. Richards will be here in a few minutes. You two just sit tight." The middle-aged woman leaves us, and I pointedly refuse to look at Steve.

"The wall's more interesting than me, huh?" He asks, and I blink away from it to stare at him. He grins cheekily. "I mean, I know I'm pretty messed up right now, but at least I've got some color on me."

"That's not funny." I frown, eyes flicking worriedly to the gash on his forehead. "I thought... I couldn't tell if you were breathing." I whisper.

"Hey, come here." He offers out a bruised-knuckled hand and I stand from the chair in the corner to take it, standing between his open legs. "I'm fine. Nothing feels broken. At most I only have a concussion, but I'm not nauseous or dizzy. I'm just tired. I'm not going anywhere. I'm here, you're here with me. Will's going to be okay, your brother's at home sleeping just like the rest of the kids. Nance is

with Mike, and Jonathan's with his mom and his brother. Eleven is alive and with Hopper." He promises, voice gentle. "And you never have to deal with that bullshit dimension again. No more visions, no more tunnels, no more vines." I nod at his words and bow my head, and he lets go of my hand to wrap his arms around my waist and pull me closer. Our foreheads press against each other's gently, and my green eyes meet his hazel. They're browner, now, and a touch unfocused, but his pupils aren't as dilated as earlier. "We're all going to be fine."

"Okay." I smile at him, hands holding his shoulders. My right reaches up to cup his chin, avoiding the cuts. "I'm sorry. For slapping you." I apologize, stroking the slightly reddened cheek.

"Don't be." He shrugs. "I mean, I messed up. Should've gotten Dustin out fast-:

"That's not why I slapped you." I cut him off, shaking my head.

"Why did you?" Steve asks, but his brown-hazel eyes are reading me, like he knows the answer already. He probably does.

"I... you *scared* me, Steve. I thought I lost *both* of you, and I can't... I can't go through that. Like, Nance and Johnny are my siblings, and I love them, but you..." I trail off, trying to figure out what words to use. "Shit, Steve. You're my best friend. Sometimes I think you know me better than Jonathan does, and we've known each other all our lives. You *matter* to me."

He nods and leans in closer to me, our lips a breath away. "That's what I thought. You *matter* to me too, Roni."

It would have been an amazing first kiss... if Dr. Richards hadn't chosen that exact moment to waltz in. I jumped away from Steve and turned around to greet the older man, who had no idea what he interrupted as he was busy going over Steve's chart.

As the good doctor and Steve talk, I settle back down in my chair. For the first time in a year, I'm starting to believe that things will get better.

---

I'll deny this to Steve's face for the rest of my life, but I absolutely did not tear up when Dr. Richards confirmed it was only a minor concussion. Steve was lucky - he didn't require stitches, the wound on his forehead clotted and wasn't as deep as we believed, but he'd have a scar for awhile. No broken bones or ribs, just a lot of cuts and bruises.

Steve was kept overnight, though, for observation. You can never be too sure when it comes to a head injury. It was a quiet enough night - and it's a small town, people know what happened to me last year - that the doctor let me stay with him. Nurse Ellen even brought in a cot for me to rest on.

I woke up to Steve being discharged, Dr. Richards handing me his medicine like I was more prepared to handle them than the older teen. I ran out to the car to grab our change of clothes, and twenty minutes later we were rushing to make second period, the doctor's notes tucked carefully in our backpacks. I'd also made sure to call my mom, delivering the good news as quickly as possible.

"Wow, perks of still technically being King, huh?" I ask as Steve parks in his usual spot, the two of us getting out of the car with about as much grace as a newborn giraffe given how drained we still are.

"Not a king anymore." Steve mumbles, yawning with his jaw so wide I'm worried he'll reopen the cut on his lip.

"I don't know about that." *You're still King of my heart.*

"Well, at least I've got my Ice Queen. You've always been good for my social standing." I snort and slap his chest, and he laughs before throwing his arm over my shoulders and pulling me into him as we walk towards the school. I'm still wearing my converse, so Steve definitely towers over me.

The halls are empty when we walk down them, and we stop in front of his locker first. "Shit, I didn't even bother doing the homework." Steve pouts, and I nod.

"Same. Ah well, we were busy saving Hawkins."

"Yeah, we can't tell them that." He deadpans at me, and I smile.

"I've got an excuse. My brother's *demon dog* ate my homework."

My lips twitch as we stare at each other, and Steve's shoulders shake until finally we break into laughter, covering our mouths so we don't draw attention to ourselves.

After a few minutes we calm down, and Steve pulls out what he needs before lunch. "Shit, I don't have my gym clothes either." He bemoans.

I snort. "Yeah, doctor's note. You aren't playing for a good week, so relax and get to class. And don't forget to show your note to your teacher." I point at him. He rolls his eyes then quickly leans down to kiss my cheek.

"Mhmm. Okay, beautiful." He closes his locker and walks away from me towards his math class, and I watch him go with a red face and a gaping mouth.

As he disappears I smile, then shake my head and rush over to my own locker. I grab my history textbook and rush off to my class.

"Ms. Henderson, how kind of you to join us." Ms. Peterson quips, beady eyes boring into me through the thick lenses of her glasses. The class doesn't make a sound, and I feel wary eyes on me.

I give her a pleasant smile and pass her my hospital note.

"Sorry, it was a long night."

She purses her lips and nods, eyes flicking over the note before she passes it back. "I see. Make sure to give this to the office. Have a seat, Ms. Henderson. We were just reviewing last week's lesson on the American Revolution."

I smile in thanks and sit down in my usual seat, attempting to pay attention to Ms. Peterson while stopping myself from falling asleep.

A note drops in front of my desk, and I tiredly flip it open.

## ***You okay? - Tina***

I look over at her and shrug, and she gives me a sad smile. "Later?" She mouths, and I nod.

The rest of the class passes pretty fast, and before I know it I'm shuffling off to the library to spend my free period doing the homework I'd ignored.

I take a seat in the furthest spot in the library, left to my own devices as I pull out my worksheets and loose paper to bullshit my way through this academic mess.

As I'm rolling my wrist, trying to finish up the last of my physics assignment - thankfully only a couple of teachers assigned homework - someone drops down onto the seat across from me.

"Hey." My eyes flick up, seeing through the loose, long blonde curls covering my face.

"How's Will?" I ask Jonathan. "I'm surprised your mom let you leave the house."

Jonathan smiles softly at me and shrugs, pulling out his portfolio for art class in fourth period - right after lunch. "He's fine. Sleeping and watching movies with mom. She let me go when I reminded her I had to check up on you. How are you?"

"One minute." I mutter, scratching down my final answer before heaving a sigh and shoving my work into my folder. "Better. I'm... tired. Not sure everything's hit me, yet."

"How's Steve? We didn't see him, earlier."

"Took him to the hospital. Just a minor concussion, but we stayed there until a little before second period. He's in gym now, probably pissed he's been put on the bench." I smile, thinking about how pouty he must be.

"There it is." Jonathan grins at me, and I raise my eyebrows in confusion.



"What?"

"That smile."

I roll my eyes and pat his hand. "Buddy, I do smile, you know."

He shakes his head, giving me that soft brotherly expression of his. "Not like that, you don't. Not since we were younger."

"God, that feels like so long ago." I murmur, staring off into space.

"Yeah. Things were so..."

"Different." I finish. Then I smile at him, still holding his hand. "You look so happy. It's nice to see."

His eyes flick over me, and he lets out a small sigh. "I don't blame you, you know. For everything that happened. I shouldn't have acted like you did. I should've told you that I knew you weren't okay."

"I should've told you. We both messed up. So, from now on, no secrets?" I release his hand and offer my pinky finger. With a snort, he takes it in his own.

"No secrets."

I sit up then wince when I twist the wrong way, bruises on my ribs making my torso feel tight. "Starting with whatever happened to you. I kind of figured some shit went down with Billy before Steve mentioned it last night, but Steve was a little fuzzy on the details. Or maybe he just didn't want to talk to me. I did take Nancy from him." He mumbles guiltily.

I roll my eyes. "No one took anyone, Nance is her own person capable of making her own decisions, so let's stop thinking girls are prizes to win." He sputters a bit. "Yeah, I know that's not what you meant. But she and Steve said they spoke and they didn't seem to be upset with each other, and Steve never told me he wants to kill you or anything."

"Gee, thanks, that's reassuring." Jonathan interrupts, and I laugh under my breath.

"Just... God, just clear the air with him, I guess. I don't know."

Jonathan nods and sighs. "I'm so tired."

"Join the club."

"Does it start before or after 'Our Dads Suck club'?" He sasses me, and I grin.

"You're hilarious, Johnny."

"Yeah. I also forgot one of my photos." He starts to stand up and gather his belongings. "I'm gonna go grab it then pick up Nancy from her class." I coo and he shoves my shoulder, my torso tweaking a bit but I don't make a sound.

"Alright. Why don't you two lovebirds meet me at my locker after? We'll go to the cafeteria together."

"Okay. See you in a few. Try not to get into any trouble while I'm gone, Ver."

I grin. "Doubtful, Johnny."

He rolls his eyes and leaves the library, almost bumping into a cart of books in his haste. I snort then sigh, figuring I should put my recently completed homework back into my locker for safe keeping.

With a groan I stand and stretch, wincing at the tugging in my ribs as I grab my belongings and leave the quiet place behind.

The halls are relatively empty. A few students move out of my way and I shuffle tiredly to my locker, unlocking it and shoving everything in. Money pocketed in the back pocket of my tight jeans, someone clears their throat.

I slam my locker closed and turn, arms crossed and face impassive. "What do you want, Hargrove?" I ask, tone bored.

His eyebrows shoot up but he leans forward like he usually does, getting in my space. Any butterflies flapping around are held down by every vengeful urge I have to mess him up worse than he did

Steve. To get payback for how he treated the kids, how he treated Lucas and Max. How he could've killed my brother. "You alright, baby girl?"

I scoff, laughing incredulously. "Seriously? You have to ask?"

"Whoa, Queen V. Let's tone down the fucking ice." He orders, non-threatening but eyes burning.

"Fat chance." I mutter. "What do you want?" I ask.

"Clarification."

"On what? The fact you're a dick? Sure." I shoot at him, smiling innocently. "You're a dick."

"That wasn't what I was asking, Veronica." He growls, then leans forward some more. "See, I'm a little hazy about last night. Foggy and shit. Probably the drugs you let my bitch stepsister shove in my neck." He gestures at his jugular. "But I thought I heard you say 'we're done'. See, I wasn't so sure, because I drove to your house this morning to pick you up, only your mom gave me the third degree before sending me on my way. Then I come to find out from some little birdies that you came to school with Harrington. I also heard he had his arm around your shoulders. So, again. You broke up with me last night?"

I pretend to think about it and nod. "That would be correct."

"What the hell Veronica?" He growls, nearly drowned out by the dismissal bell. "You broke up with me? Why?!" He shouts, and the students piling out of their classrooms stare at us, but also keep their distance.

"You *seriously* have to ask?" I harshly return, arms crossed.

"Is this because I hurt Harrington? Because the whiny bitch deserved it." He hisses back, and I choke a little.

"How? What did he do?"

"He -"

"Oh, and 'hurt him'?" I cut him off. "No, *Billy*, hurting him would've been a couple of licks and a swipe at his ego. What you did was potential *manslaughter*. You nearly beat my best friend to death. I can't be with someone who acts one way with me, then completely different with other people. That isn't healthy, Billy. It's a relationship based on a lie, and that shit never ends well."

"Jesus, Veronica, so I lost control! Harrington's a punk." He shoots at me, and I feel everyone's eyes on us. But I'm not going to back off.

"Don't you dare use that tone of voice with me, not with the shit you pulled." I poke his chest, completely unimpressed.

Billy rolls his eyes then looks around, smiling like some sort of demon at the gathered crowd. At his warning gaze they start to disperse. He deflates then looks down at me. "Fine. I'll apologize to Harrington -"

"This isn't just about Steve!" I growl, poking him again. "It's also about you attacking a *kid* I've known most of his life because of the *color of his skin*." I harshly whisper to him, and he narrows his eyes. "Hell, the fact you *terrorize* someone as amazing as Max definitely isn't doing you any favors. She may not share the same blood as you, but you're supposed to be her older brother. The 'step' part shouldn't matter. But the straw that broke the camel's back? Finding out that you almost ran my brother and his friends over on Halloween. I don't care if you didn't know it was Dustin. You would've killed three kids just to keep Max 'in line', and that isn't okay."

"Oh. Yo-you know." Billy gets out, stepping back. Then his face hardens. "Goddamn Maxine told you, right? C'mon, baby girl, that little bitch just wants to ruin us."

I raise an eyebrow. "No, actually, my brother told me. But way to be a douchebag and blame someone else for your dick move. That was my brother you could have run over. *My little brother!*" I shout and shove Billy away, using all the force I have. "Fuck you, William Hargrove." I growl as I keep moving him.

"Veronica, wait -" He grabs my ribs to stop me and I yelp at how strong the touch is, almost gasping in pain. He freezes and removes

his hands. "What the hell was that?" He asks, and I pale.

Look, I'm beyond pissed at him. But my ribcage is something I didn't want him to learn about. I know he didn't mean to do it, I know he never wanted to hurt me.

"Billy, it was nothing, stop -" I try, looking around but noticing the hallways are empty, sound wafting down them from the cafeteria.

Billy ignores me and instead lifts my tight green turtleneck, eyes glued to the bruising on my ribs. I haven't checked on them since last night, so I don't exactly know what they look like now. "Who did that? Veronica, who... *oh*." He whispers, blinking at the bruises before looking at me, ocean eyes lost. "Oh, shit. I-I *hurt you*? Why didn't you start off with that?" He questions, voice the softest it's been since he started this conversation.

I shake my head and frown, lowering my shirt. "No, Billy, these were *accidents*. They were the only things you didn't mean last night. You have more than enough to feel guilty about, focus on this shit you *meant* to do."

"Don't." He shakes his head, stepping away from me completely. "Don't make excuses. That's how it starts, as accidents, and then the next thing you know I'm screaming at you like *he did to her*, and I'm punching you exactly like *he did to her*." He alludes to his parents. "It's a slippery slope. I *hurt* you. I never wanted to hurt *you*." He keeps walking backwards, and my hands start to lower after my failed attempt to stop him. "I'm sorry. I'll stay away from you and your friends. I won't bother Max, like she made me promise. I'll even leave Harrington alone. I won't spread shit, I won't let anyone spread shit about us or you. I'll tell everyone the truth, that you dumped me because I fucked up *big time*. And I won't... I'll leave you alone. I'm sorry, Veronica. You deserve better." He walks away from me, head a little bowed. The butterflies he used to give me go with him.

I don't know how long I stand there - it's probably a shorter time than I think - before someone clears their throat. I turn around to see Nancy smiling down at me, though it doesn't quite reach her eyes as she stares down the hallway. "You guys heard all that?"

"Only the end. Can't say I'm too upset to see him walking away, but... how are you?" Nancy asks, and I smile.

"I'm... I feel fine. I mean, I'm still coming to terms with everything, but this," I gesture in the direction Billy disappeared, "this I understand."

Nancy gives me a relieved smile, then I'm pulled into a careful hug. "I'm so glad you're okay." She lets me go then rubs at her stomach. "I'm also starving, so if we could go eat I'd be even happier."

I laugh but nod. "Jesus, me too."

*"Drama queens."* Jonathan murmurs, but he tugs Nancy into him and the new couple leads the way to the cafeteria.

I glance up at Steve as we walk, but look away when he notices. Seconds later an arm is wrapping itself around my shoulders, and I lean my head on him as we walk into the lunch room, uncaring of the stares and whispers. The four of us grab our food from the lunch ladies and sit at an empty table. I laugh with Nancy and Jonathan, a smile stuck on my face as Steve's left hand reaches over to take my right, his thumb resting on my ring.

## 19. We're Holding On and Letting Go

**WARNING: THIS IS A VERY HEAVY CHAPTER.** Veronica started off the story already having depression and anxiety, but now she also has PTSD. As her powers are dormant this means she's dealing with her feelings without her connection to the Upside Down distracting her. She also throws up at the beginning of the chapter, but it's not particularly graphic.

Again this is the chapter dedicated to the anniversary of Barb and Veronica's disappearance as well as Barb's death. We've got Veronica's point of view as well as Steve's. Nancy is big in this, and there's some Dustin and Claudia content too. I wrote stuff for Jonathan and even made Tommy an actual human, so growth. The kids, Joyce, and Hopper are also mentioned. This is going up literally seconds after the canonical date Veronica disappeared (11/8), so another yay for almost-consistency between reality and fiction I guess?

This is a chapter on grief, health, and remembering things can and will get better. Hope, after all, is stronger than fear. Even if it doesn't seem like it at the time. There's cute Steve and Veronica moments also, so yet another yay for unspoken love.

As always, I only own Veronica. I hope you like this chapter (since enjoy feels like such a strange word, given what happens here) and remember that the next one will definitely be more cheerful.

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I wake up breathing heavily, blood pumping and heart pulsing like it's about to beat out of my chest. My throat's dry and scratchy, like I've been screaming. But no one's here to wake me, which means the sounds never escaped.

All at once my stomach rolls, and I make a mad dash to the bathroom so I can knee before the porcelain throne.

I'm gasping for air as I heave, choking on my tears as I keep them in. My whole body is sweating, my body is tingling, and I suppose it

feels like coming down from a bad high. I can't even remember my dream, but I know what it must have been. Afterall, today's the day I've been dreading all year.

November 8th. The day Barb and I disappeared. The day I let her slip from my fingers. The day she was probably killed, because I don't want to imagine her suffering. I want it to have been a quick kill, like a merciful hunter would do it. She never deserved what happened to her.

I groan as I heave out the last of my stomach contents and flush, a shadow looming behind me. I look up to see my mom, backlit by the golden sunrise pouring out through my room. "Oh, dumpling. What can I get you?" She asks.

"I'm... I'm..." I let out a sob and fold in on myself, body even more compact than usual. I can feel the vines creeping over me, I can hear Barb screaming. And I can't breathe.

"Sweetheart, look at me." Hands cup my sweaty cheeks and I try to focus on the fuzzy woman in front of me. "You're here, you're with me. Today is awful, I know, but you will not be alone. Even if you need your space, Dustin and I will be nearby."

I cough and keep trying to breathe, eventually matching hers. "I... I..."

"It's okay. Take your time. Focus on breathing, Veronica."

I nod, no longer gasping for air. I'm still anxious, though, stomach twisted in knots and mind dark and terrible. It's like being locked inside a pitch-black room that's closing in on itself, and the only thing you can do is sit there and wait for it to be over. "Shower. Want a shower." I mumble, curling into my mom some more. She just holds me, warm in her furry pink robe and hair still in curlers.

"Okay. Okay, sweetheart." She kisses my forehead twice. "Go take your shower. I'm going to make you some tea."

I nod and watch her go, and she leaves the door slightly ajar. With shaky limbs I force myself to stand, stripping from my sweat-



drenched pajamas and tugging a towel closer to the shower.

I pull the curtains back a bit to reach in and turn the shower head on, letting the water get hot. I also brush my teeth, ignoring the sting of mint as I brush and brush to get rid of the taste in my mouth. Satisfied I rinse and step into the tub, letting the shower rain over me, staring straight ahead and bracing my hands on the tile wall before me. My fingers scratch at it, not hard enough to tear them open, but enough that I feel something.

My shoulders shake as more tears fall, and I look up at the shower head, rinsing it all away. Barb's screams are still filling my ears, taunting my guilt and reminding me of how I failed.

I'm just going through the motions, scrubbing my hair with shampoo and conditioner and trying to wash everything away.

*It doesn't work.*

I shut off the water when I realize I'm shivering from how cold it's gotten, and wrap myself in the fuzzy towel, gold ring shining on my thumb. I shuffle back to my room and close the door behind me, dropping my towel and pull on some underwear, forgoing a bra and opting for a thick black sweater and some grey sweatpants. I leave my feet bare and my hair wet, rubbing under my eyes as I head over to the kitchen.

My mom's pattering around, a kettle heating up on the stove. "Are you hungry?" She asks me, quieter than usual. I shake my head and clench my fists, nails biting into my palm. When she turns back around I release them, but I don't quite manage a smile. She frowns and walks over to kiss my forehead before walking off to the bathroom.

I just keep staring ahead, surrounded by silence until the shrill whistle from the kettle screams out and I have to cover my ears, the pitch too close to Barb's screams.

"Oh, dumpling, I'm so sorry!" My mom apologizes, rushing back into the kitchen to turn off the heat and pour some water into my mug, but I'm still rocking in the kitchen chair, hands clenched over my

ears. She crouches in front of me, the steaming tea placed next to me as she gently and cautiously rubs my knees. "I'm sorry. I know. I'm sorry."

*She doesn't know, though. She doesn't know the truth. She doesn't know what happened to Barb, what I went through.*

The screams in my head start to fade so I remove my hands and nod at her. Half her curlers are still in, and she looks frazzled. I feel like such a burden, like she wouldn't be this worried if nothing happened to me. If I wasn't such a mess. "I'll be in the other room, sweetheart. You drink your tea, maybe lie down on the couch. I'm sure Dustin will be out soon." She whispers, kissing my forehead again as she goes.

I stand up and carefully take my mug with me, walking over to the couch and setting the mug on the coffee table. With a sigh I lie down, curling up into a ball and facing the back of the couch.

I'm counting the wrinkles in the fabric when something soft is placed over me. "Hey Leia."

"Chewie." I mutter, and his hand runs through my blonde curls.

"Should I turn on some music?" Head shake. "A movie?" Head shake. "I can read a book to you?"

"Which one?"

*"The Merry Adventures of Robin Hood."*

"Okay."

He shuffles off and I stay rolled over, blanket covering me from head to toe. Eventually he returns, and I lift my head a bit so he can sit next to me, resting my left temple on the edge of his thigh. He clears his throat. "Chapter one, How Robin Hood Came To Be an Outlaw. 'In merry England in the time of old, when good King Henry the Second ruled the land, there lived within the green glades of Sherwood Forest, near Nottingham Town, a famous outlaw whose name was Robin Hood. No archer ever lived that could speed a gray goose shaft with such skill and cunning as his, nor were there ever such yeomen

as the sevenscore merry men that roamed with him through the greenwood shades. Right merrily they dwelled within the depths of Sherwood Forest, suffering neither care nor want, but passing the time in merry games of archery or bouts of cudgel play, living upon the King's venison, washed down with draughts of ale of October brewing..."

As Dustin reads I begin to drift off, imagining beautiful green forests and clear blue skies.

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It's significantly brighter when I open my eyes, heart fluttering with nerves and goosebumps raising my flesh. This time I was stuck in the pool, vines holding me down while Barb was dragged away over, and over, and over again.

There are three voices coming from the kitchen, and I sit up carefully and get up from the couch, blanket wrapped tightly around my body.

Nancy's sitting with my mom and Dustin at the kitchen table, hands cradling a cup of coffee. Her eyes are red and puffy, almost as shadowed as mine. She stands as soon as I enter and sets down the mug to hug me, arms shaking.

"Won't your mom be mad you're skipping school?" I whisper, voice hoarse from lack of use.

"No, no. I got permission and everything. I was going to skip anyway but I figured... I figured neither one of us should be alone." She whispers back and I nod in thanks, leaning on her some more. "Your mom said you haven't eaten yet. Do you want something?" I shake my head. "Do you want to lie back down?" I shrug. "Let's go lie down."

"Do you want to lie down?" I ask. I'm not alone in my grief today.

"Yes." She keeps me close to her as we walk past my brother and mom, ending up in my room. I vaguely realize the sheets have been changed - warm flannel awaits us rather than the sweaty cotton from last night.

I curl up under the covers, watching as Nancy removes her shoes. She's dressed as comfortably as I am, a far cry from her usual preppy look. Her curls are just as messy as mine, and when she slips under the covers we come close to each other, blonde and brown locks interlocking.

"Do you think... should we talk about her?" Nancy asks, sniffing. I make a small noise, and shrug. "I just think... maybe if we tell stories, it'll help." I mumble something and nod, head tucking into her neck, eyes closing as I listen to her.

"The first time I *really* met Barb, God, it was the second week of sixth grade. I'd always sort of kept to myself. Remember? I was always quiet, and shy, and I liked reading more than talking to other people." I nod in confirmation. "Barb and I were paired for a project in English. She was still quiet, but she had a bunch of other people to consider friends. And at first, we were awkward with each other... I was awkward, she just tried to make me more comfortable. Finally, she got a huge plot point wrong. I don't even remember what we were reading, but I remember arguing with her loudly and aggressively. When I finished, she just looked at me and smiled, and that was that. I still don't know if she got the story wrong on purpose or not."

"She probably did. Get it wrong on purpose, I mean." I whisper.

"Yeah. She was always so good at getting us to open up."

"She was the best."

"Yeah."

I tear up, eyes still closed as I press my forehead into Nancy's neck. "I'm so sorry."

"No, I'm sorry." I blink my eyes open and pull back, looking up at her. She's just staring up at the ceiling. "I was the one who made us go to Steve's. If I hadn't pressured her into trying to shotgun a beer, she wouldn't have cut herself. She wouldn't have been bleeding, and the Demogorgon would've left both of you alone. This is on me."

"No!" I gruff out, shaking my head. "No!"

She blinks down at rage burst out of me, at my shaking limbs. "I -"

"No!" I grunt. "My fault. It-it's my fault. I coul-could've... I could've saved her. Sh-she let me. She let me go up first. Ev-even though my... my ankle was sprained. I wasn't strong enough. I've never been strong enough." I whisper, curling into myself.

*My fault, my fault, my fault.*

"Hey, hey, shh. Hey. I'm sorry, it's okay. We don't have to talk about her. Okay?"

"She was your best friend." I whisper, crying. "I couldn't save her. I couldn't save Bob."

"That you even tried to - that you would've died to save both of them... Vera, you're amazing. You're so brave. And you have such a big heart, one of the biggest I've ever known. So it's okay to feel like this, to feel sad. To feel like the whole world is dark." She cries with me, stammering a bit. "I feel it, too. Maybe not the same way you do, but I do."

I nod and wrap an arm around her stomach, coming closer to her. "I know."

"And I understand you won't believe me for awhile, when I tell you this isn't your fault. That you didn't fail. I get it. But I'm still going to remind you."

"Me, too."

"We're quite the pair, huh? A sisterhood created out of grief and trauma." She snorts a little.

I manage a small lip twitch. "Monster hunting, too. But we work."

"Yeah, Vera."

We lay there in silence, wrapped around each other as close as possible. Finally, I let out a small sigh. "In freshman year, after we

became friends, Barb forced me to go to the library for, like, *hours*." Nancy nods at my words. "She was tired of me blowing off homework to go to the range, and she threatened to break my bow. I'd never been more scared of her in my life." Nancy lets out a small giggle. "God, she was so scary when she was pissed."

"Yeah. She was so tall, too."

"A giant."

"A friendly giant." We look into each other's eyes. "She was always so proud of you, you know? She thought you were so cool, even before we all became friends." Nancy mumbles tiredly to me.

"Yeah?" I ask, nuzzling into my pillow more.

"Mhmm. When we found out about your dad, and we saw how you changed... God, she was sad. For you. About you becoming so cold. She told me she missed your smile and your jokes."

"Didn't mean to change. Just..."

"Had to. We knew. She was so excited when the two of you became friends. She was also so proud of herself for getting you to laugh like you used to."

"You did, too."

"Yeah, but I took my cues from Barb. She had you figured out better than most."

"Jonathan would've fought her on that." I mutter, and Nancy lets out a quiet laugh.

"In the seventh grade we had a sleepover at my house. I was feeling spontaneous, and decided we should prank call people. She groaned about it and complained, but as soon as she found Tommy H's and Drew's numbers she got super excited. She pretended to be a college girl and a persistent saleswoman."

I grin a little. "Did she come up with backstories?"

"Please, she was a stickler for details. She knew their names, what they did for fun, who their parents were, where they came from. Only Barb could make a prank call so elaborate."

"She would've been an awesome detective. Or journalist." My smile fades. "She deserved better."

"Yeah. She did." Nancy agrees.

"Sorry." I whisper, the room feeling colder and darker than before.

"Hey, no. Don't apologize for being sad, for being in pain. We're allowed to feel like this. I'd be... I'd be worried if you felt nothing."

"I do. I feel..." She looks down at me, concern and confusion written all over her face. "I feel everything and nothing all at once. Like, there's this void in my chest, but my mind is over-packed with emotions. It's like drowning and taking in oxygen at the same time."

Her arm wraps around me even tighter, and I rest my head on her shoulder. A hand reaches up to stroke through my blonde hair. "You're going to be okay. Both of us are. It'll... it'll get easier. Day by day, month by month, year by year."

"I know."

"Not today, though. This is our day to feel... to feel everything we haven't let ourselves yet. But we're going to do it together."

"Always." I promise. She nods against my head, and I feel her breathing even out all the more.

"Mhmm."

We drift off together, my arm tightly wrapped over her stomach and her hand still running through my curls.

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*3rd Person POV (Steve's)...*

He woke up knowing today would suck. The guilt about Barb's death - something he knew he couldn't have controlled, but still feels at

fault for - mixed with Nancy's drunken words of blame eat at him even as he sits on the bench, attempting to do some homework while the shrill whistle blows and feet pound against the floor. But nothing, absolutely nothing, comes close to the fear and overwhelming sadness consuming every inch of him as he thinks about Roni. How she must be doing, how hard on herself she's been, how she could've been killed, too, body never returned. How Dustin would be mourning the sister he so clearly loves, how yet another *good* parent would be missing their child.

The very idea that he'd never see her smile or hear her laugh again bites at Steve, and he starts to picture her body mangled and brilliant emerald eyes glazed and colder than her nickname.

The bell rings and he's up and packing his bag in an instant, rushing out of the gym and pushing guys out of the way to leave. Someone follows him and he prays it's Hargrove so he can punch the dick and then get sent home. He could go see Roni, check up on her. Her and Nancy, who told him she'd be at the Henderson house. It only made sense, and he's just glad neither girl will be alone. They'll have each other, before he can go see them.

"Harrington!"

Steve sighs and turns, "Yeah Tommy?" He asks his former best friend, the boy's freckled face all red from the exercise. "How can I help you, pal?"

"I just wanted to know..." Oh God, please say something douchey. Go ahead, make his day. "I just wanted to see how you're doing. Today."

Steve blinks. "Uh, what?" He asks.

Tommy sighs and looks away, scratching the back of his head. Students mill around them, staring at the former best friends and gossiping amongst themselves. Steve's positive more than enough are itching for the two to fight. "C'mon, man, you're not this stupid. I'm just... I was worried, Harrington."

Steve shrugs. "I'm fine."



Tommy frowns, reading him clearly. "I know we don't talk anymore, but I'm not an idiot. We've been friends for years."

"Were friends, Hanson." Steve reminds him.

Tommy glares. "Yeah, well, that shit wouldn't be past tense if you hadn't ditched me and Carol for Wheeler." Steve rolls his eyes and braces his hands on his hips. Tommy huffs. "Whatever, man. I'm not trying to start a fight." Steve raises an eyebrow. "Seriously. I get it. I know. But that doesn't make what you did any less dickish."

Steve frowns and shrugs. "Fair." The students around them start to move away, a few grumbling about the lack of a physical confrontation.

"Look man, I'm worried about you, that's all. Especially today." Tommy sighs. "I remember what you were like, when Wheeler told you Veronica never went home, that she and Holland - *Barb* - were missing. It was scary, dude. God, if that had been Carol, I would've been just as bad."

"I'm fine now."

"No, you aren't. Neither are the girls, especially not Veronica." Tommy tells him with the softest voice he's ever used. "Again, I'm an asshole, but I ain't a complete idiot. Besides, Veronica was always cool. She shouldn't have had to go through that shit."

Steve nods, thinking how much worse it actually was for Roni, what else she had to deal with. "Thanks, Tommy. I'm... I'm not okay. Jesus, it's hard to even remember that she's still here. I'm just thinking all these bad things, like she's still gone or she's dead."

"That sucks, Steve."

"Yeah, it really does."

The former best friends smile at each other, and Tommy shakes himself out of it. "I've gotta go 'meet up' with Carol."

"Let me guess, in your car?" Steve rolls his eyes, but it's friendly.

Tommy snorts. "Today. I think we're under the bleachers tomorrow."

"Gross, dude."

"Yeah, yeah, like you haven't done the same thing King Steve."

Steve wrinkles his nose. "I'm classy."

"Uh-huh. Right. Well, Mr. Classy, I'll see you around. And when you go see Veronica later, tell her Carol and I hope she feels better." Tommy shakes his head. "Man, she's a cool chick. Don't tell her I said that."

Steve grins. "Please, she wouldn't believe it if I *did*." Tommy laughs and waves, walking back into the gym to change. Steve just walks towards the cafeteria, stomach grumbling as he waits in line for his lunch. Jonathan waves him over to an empty table and he walks his way, forced to pass Hargrove and his posse. Tina briefly stops Steve to ask about Veronica and Nancy, and he watches as Billy shuts up, closing in on himself. After Monday, the news spread that the new King was dumped by the Ice Queen. Hargrove nearly tore Matt apart for calling Roni a bitch during basketball practice, growling that he was the one who messed up, and that anyone else who says something bad about his "Queen V" would get beat worse than Harrington.

That shut everyone else up *real* quick.

"They're okay, I think they're together right now. I'm going to stop by later, but I can tell them you wanted to check in."

Tina nods gratefully and clasps her hands together. "Please. I know today's got to be horrible. Let them know I'm thinking about them, yeah?"

"Of course. Thanks, Tina." Steve gives her a small smile and resumes his walk over to Jonathan, sitting across from his ex's new boyfriend.

*And his friend.* He reminds himself, before realizing he isn't bitter anyway.

"How're Will and your mom?" Steve asks, opening up his applesauce

and swallowing a spoonful.

Jonathan shrugs. "As good as they can be. Mom misses Bob, but it's a little easier knowing she has Will still. I almost didn't go to school today, but I figured I could grab the girls' homework."

"I wouldn't mind doing it, if you want to go home. Be with your family." Steve offers, and the younger teen shakes his head.

"No, it's okay. I've spent the past couple of days so focused on Will, I haven't made time for Veronica or Nancy."

"Hey, buddy, I'm sure they understand." Steve tells him comfortingly.

Jonathan looks up at him with a soft smile, and it's still mind blowing to Steve how much their relationship change, from enemies to good friends. And yeah, Steve misses Tommy and Carol, but being friends with Jonathan is admittedly awesome. When he isn't creeping on other people without their permission he takes great photos. He also has the coolest music and a great, weird sense of humor. The dude's hilarious when he's drunk and/or high. "Yeah, you're probably right.

"Whoa, wait a second, can you repeat that? I need to find a tape recorder, get that on record or some shit." Steve smirks at him, and Byers rolls his eyes.

"Yeah, yeah, I hope that's the only time I admit you're right. My self-respect is about to diminish."

Steve snorts. "Buddy, look at your haircut. You clearly lack self-respect. Hey!" A crumpled napkin hits him on the nose, and he narrows his eyes at a laughing Jonathan.

"Shut up!"

Steve grins again and pushes around the over steamed broccoli on his tray. "Is it just me, or is the chicken breathing?" He asks, poking at the leg.

Jonathan wrinkles his nose at his own piece of chicken. "Thanks, Harrington."

"No problem, Byers." He keeps digging into his applesauce.

"I take it you're going to go see the girls after school, too?" Jonathan guesses, and Steve nods.

"Yeah, that's the plan. I mean, unless you feel uncomfortable with me around Nancy?"

"What, no. I... I don't. Why would I be uncomfortable?"

"Because Nancy and I were dating not even a week ago?" Steve offers.

Jonathan pales a bit. "I mean, yeah. But... aren't you uncomfortable with me going over to see Ver and Nance?"

"No!" Steve shakes his head. "Roni's your sister, man, and Nance... She's your girlfriend."

"And your ex. It's okay, if you hate me. I mean, we got together a day after you broke up. Were you even broken up? Did Nancy cheat on you with me? Dude, how am I not dead?" Jonathan starts to panic. Steve just blinks at him in confusion, concerned his friend's about to have an aneurysm or some shit.

"Jonathan, hey, we're cool. Nance and I were broken up. We probably broke up way before we actually did, we just acted like everything was fine. I mean, she was right, we were bullshit. I was -"

"Hey, man, she told me all about that. She doesn't really believe what she said."

"I know, I know." Steve waves him off. "My point is, I'm okay with you two. I mean, it's a little weird but I'm not mad or pining."

"Not for Nancy, anyway." Jonathan mumbles good naturedly.

Steve groans. "God, does everybody know how I feel?"

"Are you kidding? It's the worst-kept secret in Hawkins. No one says anything because they're still scared of you."

"No, let's be honest, they're way more afraid of Roni."

Jonathan smirks. "That's true. She is intimidating."

Steve nods. "Sometimes I forget she's as short as she is."

Jonathan smiles. "Yeah. She and Nance could probably take over the world in less than a week."

"Three days, maximum." Steve counter-offers. He looks around the cafeteria, at the loud students and the sounds of utensils clinking. "I'm never gonna get over how little the rest of Hawkins knows. You know, about it."

"Yeah. Sometimes I just want to yell out the truth, but I'd probably be tossed into some cell in a straight-jacket." Byers mutters.

"To knowing the truth."

"To our badass girls." Both boys grin at each other and tap their water bottles together.

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*Veronica's POV...*

After my second nap of the morning, Nancy and I manage to stumble into the living room where my brother is watching cartoons and my mom is knitting what looks like the world's fluffiness scarf.

"Hello, girls. Are you hungry?" My mom asks, and my brother mutes the TV. I shake my head but Nancy nods.

"Yes, actually. I can make something, though -"

"No, no, sit. I was going to order pizza, if that's okay for you?" She asks, standing and walking over to the phone.

Nancy smiles. "Yes, actually, that sounds perfect."

"Cheese and pepperoni, right?" My mom asks, remembering our usual sleepover-order.

"Yes, thank you, Mrs. Henderson." Nancy politely responds.

"Please, Nancy, Claudia." My mom corrects, then picks up the phone to order.

Dustin scoots over on the couch and I sit down next to him, curling into his slightly larger frame. Nancy sits next to me, leaning her head on my shoulder. "You doing a little better, Leia?" Dustin asks, and I shrug.

"For now. Still feel lost."

"Okay. How about you, Nance?" He sweetly asks, and I feel her smile against my sweater.

"A little better, Dustin. Thank you for asking."

I bite my lip and stare ahead at the now unmuted TV, mindlessly watching. Not listening, watching. Everything else sort of fades away. I can feel myself between the bodies of my siblings, but I don't hear their breathing, their laughter, whatever they may be quietly discussing. It's just... existing, I guess.

"Hey." My senses return when Nancy pokes my shoulder, and I turn my head to look at her. "The pizza's here." I glance at my mom holding the large box, can smell the melted cheese and tomato sauce but I'm not craving it or anything. I just shrug and sit up a bit more so my brother can rush over and grab a slice, softly speaking with my mom. Nancy gently stands. "Do you want some?" I shake my head, remembering how sick I'd gotten this morning. I don't think I have to throw up again, but you never know. "You should eat something, Vera."

"Not hungry." I mumble.

"How about something to drink, like tea or water or something?" She offers.

"Not thirsty."

"Leia, you should -"

"I said no!" I shout, jumping up from the couch and glaring at my brother. He and Nancy both jump back. "Leave me alone! Just stop!" I

scream, body shivering.

"Leia..." My brother's eyes get wet and become downcast, and I deflate.

"Just... leave me alone." I beg, before walking away off brushing my mom's hands away.

I stop in my room and stare at my closet, where I keep my old hockey stick. I used to practice with Dustin when we were younger, before his "sports phase" ended.

With cold fury in my stomach I wrench the doors open and grab the stick, rushing out of my room and out the back door, closing it softly so I'm not followed.

The cold ground licks at my feet as I walk down the leaf-covered ground towards the woods, body shaking as I walk.

I don't get far, though. I can still see my house from where I am before I explode, screaming and crying as I bang at the trees with the old stick, the splintering wood giving me some sick satisfaction. "Fuck you, fuck you, *FUCK YOU!*" I roar, sobbing uncontrollably.

Pieces of the stick fly all around me, landing with thuds until I'm left with a stub. I fling it uselessly at another tree and collapse onto my knees, a battle cry tearing from my throat as I clench leaves in my fists and wail. I keep screaming until my voice cracks and becomes hoarse, until it feels like my lungs are burning and my larynx is bleeding.

Arms wrap around my shoulders from behind as I just shake, mouth open in a silent roar while sobs wrack my body and the palms of my hands dig into my eyes. "Shh, shh. I've got you, sweetheart. I've got you." My mom whispers in my ear.. I keep pulling up the sharp blades of near-frozen grass, and two additional pairs of hands help stand me up.

My mom comes into view, removing her arms from around my body and cupping my face with her hands. I can tell just from her eyes that she'd seen the whole thing - all three of them had seen it. It was their

promise, wasn't it? That they'd be nearby, giving me space but still watching.

Her mouth is moving, but I'm not hearing what she's saying. The blood is roaring too loudly in my ears for that. Nancy holds on hand and Dustin takes the other, and I'm brought back to the house, lead straight to the bathroom and seated on top of the toilet. Warm water hits my skin, and I look down to watch dirt and leaves swirl around in the tub, joining the lavender scented foam. I'm delicately moved back to the toilet and my feet are dried with a fluffy towel. I cough, clearing my throat but I still sound hoarse.

"I'll go make you some tea." Nancy whispers and I nod. My mom crouches in front of me. No words are exchanged as she gently pulls me into a warm hug, fingers dragging through my knotted hair.

When Nancy and Dustin return, we're still in the same position. Mom lets me go and Nancy takes her place. Dustin drapes himself around my back, his fuzzy curls pressed against my cheek. Part of me wants to lash out and scream for everyone to just back off, but a bigger part actually likes this. It feels... it feels like I'm being grounded. Nothing can pull me away or drag me up from two of the most important people in my life. I let it happen, letting them hold on tight until the rage simmers down, settling under five layers of skin to be shed later. I'm back to feeling empty, well, half-empty.

I clear my throat and gesture for my tea. Nancy lets go to hand the still-hot mug over, and Dustin supports me as I tiredly stand.

We shuffle back to the living room and sit down, Nancy and Dustin biting into their slices of cold pizza, sitting on either side of me. I just take small sips from my mug, barely smelling or tasting the minty water. "I'm sorry." I finally whisper, then look over at Nancy. "I'm so sorry. You're grieving, too."

She sighs and sets down her half-eaten slice, tugging me into her arms.

"Yeah. This morning... I was a mess, this morning. But Vera, being here with you, not being alone in my room, this is helping me. It isn't easier, but it's... it feels right. I wish it was helping you, too."



"You are. All of you are. I just feel so guilty. Especially because -"

"Hey, whoa, nope." Dustin cuts me off, and I turn my head to look over at him. "Leia, stop. Just stop." I nod in understanding, then bite my lip.

"You know..." my voice is muffled by Nancy's shoulder, "One of the last things Barb said to me, before... be-before we decided to wait by the pool." I pause to just breathe a little more. "She said she was lucky to be my friend. We were going to get strawberry milkshakes."

"We'll order an extra one for her next time." Nancy whispers, voice thick.

I look up at her. "She also said... she said, 'People always leave, Veronica. But you know what we do about it? We keep moving on. We prove to the world we're more than just the forgotten. Okay?'" She said that, and now I can't..." I start to sob and Nancy joins me, her composed veneer breaking until us two broken girls are curled up together on the couch, my brother walking away to give us some room.

We keep crying, our sobs not yet calmed. "When the story comes out, ma-maybe it'll get easier."

"Closure." I whisper back to her, tears slipping down my cheeks faster than rain.

"Yeah."

"It-it's still so... so hard."

"Impossible." I respond. We sit together in silence for a few more moments, our chests heaving. Then I close my eyes, hiding my face on her collarbone. "I miss her."

"Me too." Nancy nuzzles her pointy chin on top of my head.

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We're in the middle of *A New Hope* when the doorbell rings, and Dustin pauses right when Luke is attempting to cuff Chewie. The wookiee's face is frozen in a growl, and my mom bustles over to open

the door. "Oh, it's so good to see you, sweetheart. Come in, come in, the girls are on the couch." The door closes and Jonathan comes into view. Nancy perks up just a touch, and Jonathan walks straight towards us, kneeling in front of the couch. His arms open and we're both pulled into an awkward but comfortable hug. No words have to be exchanged as he holds us, but after a few moments I leave his hold so he can properly comfort Nancy.

His girlfriend holds on even tighter, her shoulders shaking. Jonathan moves a hand to grasp my right shoulder, squeezing gently. I cross my left arm over so I can hold his hand, exchanging a soft look with him while my right hand raises so I can play with Nancy's short curls. Jonathan pulls back a bit so he can kiss her gently, and I look away to give them some semblance of privacy without actually moving.

When they break apart, Nancy and I move so he can sit between us. Nancy curls completely into him, and I envy both of them for being with the person they care for like that. Romantically, I mean. Our position is the same one from Tuesday, when Nance and I went over to the Byers house after school with Steve, needing to check in on the Family. Will disappeared on that day last year, and with the added trauma of the Mind Flayer possessing him the poor kid was an understandable mess.

I was never possessed, though, and I'm handling this worse than he's been. I feel so weak. Fragile. It's like when my dad left to go be with Allison, when all that pain and guilt manifested in me every time I saw my mom's broken eyes and realized I wasn't able to protect her. Those feelings are only heightened now by the fact people have died and I couldn't even save them. And I keep... I keep expecting Jonathan to hate me for not telling him the truth. But the words "it's all your fault" haven't left his lips yet. And I know I had no say in Will's possession, but, God things would've been so different this year if I'd just been a little more honest. If Will and I were honest.

"How was school?" Nancy finally asks, clearly needing a distraction. Jonathan accepts it, and I can hear the smile in his voice as he answers her.

"Fine, nothing really happened. Ally said to say 'hi'. That was about it. Steve tried to cut fifth period, but I reminded him about the math

test he had and then walked him to the class. He wasn't happy about the lack of trust."

"Where is he now?" I timidly ask, voice still rough. Jonathan looks down at me worriedly, reading how rough the day's been from my eyes.

"He had to go run an errand, I think. But he'll be here." Jonathan looks like he wants to say more, but decides against it when I yawn. "Let's get you in bed."

"I've been sleeping all day." I murmur.

Jonathan ignores me in favor of standing up, crouching down to lift me like some damsel in distress. Nancy reaches up to squeeze my hand as we pass her, but let's go. The walk to my room is quiet and Jonathan sets me down on the left side of my bed, tucking me under the warm covers. He sits down in the space between my stomach and the edge of the bed, stroking my hair. "I'm sorry this is happening to you. I'm sorry there isn't anything I can do to stop it."

"No, you can't. But not being alone... it helps." I promise. "Steve's really coming?"

"Yeah, he is."

"Okay. Just want... just want what you and Nance have." I mumble, nuzzling my head into my feather-soft pillow. "A partner."

"Hey now, I'm your partner. Don't know where I'd be if it weren't for you?"

"Not that kind of partner." I whisper. "But yes."

"I know."

"You're good for her."

"Yeah?"

"Mhmm. You make her happy, Johnny. She makes you happy. You both deserve to be so happy."

"So do you, rockstar. Listen, I'll be outside, so you can -"

"No! Stay. Stay till I fall asleep." I plead tiredly, eyes closing. His hand comes up and lands on my covered shoulder blades, the soft strokes and even breathing helping to send me into a dreamless sleep.

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*3rd Person POV (Steve's)...*

Steve knows he's nervous when he walks up to the front door. Hell, his stomach had been twisted in knots all day. When he woke up, when he was in school, when he was leaving the freaking flower shop.

He carefully fixes the bouquet in his hand before softly knocking, not wanting Roni to be scared by a loud noise. He doesn't have to wait long, or knock more than twice. Dustin opens the door, his usual bright blue eyes dimmed and red. He looks up at Steve like he's going to save the day or some shit, and yeah, Steve kind of feels obligated to do it.

"How is she? Them? You?" He asks as he steps into the house, slipping off his shoes. "And your mom?" He adds, Dustin leading him into the living room.

Nancy is curled up against Jonathan on the couch, the other male nodding at Steve when he comes into view, looking even more rundown than back at school.

"It's, uh... it's been rough." Dustin quietly admits.

"And Roni?"

"Sleeping." Jonathan quietly announces, Nancy poking her head up and blinking like she's just come back to Earth. She probably has. "Almost twenty minutes now."

"Oh. That's..." He sighs and looks away, choosing your walk to the kitchen.

Claudia Henderson is sitting down, a mug of coffee in front of her as well as a half-eaten sandwich. The normally lively woman stares

forlornly at nothing, her fingers tapping against the edge of the table.

"Hi, Mrs. Henderson." Steve softly greets, and she looks up at him. Unsurprisingly she puts on a brave face, attempting a smile but it doesn't reach her eyes.

"Oh, Steve, I'm so glad you can make it."

"I wouldn't be anywhere else." He admits, then gestures to the flowers in his hand. "I, uh, I need a vase for these."

Now the smile reaches her eyes, if a little wet. "Oh, Steve, they're lovely." She whispers, giving him a fond look. Steve blushes and looks down. "She's lucky time have you, you know." At that he looks up at Roni's mom, lips parted. "I'll get you that vase." Claudia stands and moves around the kitchen, eventually settling on a beautiful glass pitcher etched with gold designs. He waits for her to finish filling it with water before she comes back to him. He gently puts the bouquet inside, rearranging them. "Where would you like to put them?" Mrs. Henderson asks, and he finishes fussing over the flowers.

"In her room." He announces, taking the arrangement from the older woman. "Is that okay?"

"I think it's a wonderful idea." He lets out a sigh of relief and turns to make his little delivery. "And Steve?" He pauses and turns around, mind rolling with confusion. "I meant what I said. You make her very happy." Steve lets out a soft noise, then thinks back on every single mistake he's made when it comes to Roni. "I promise you do. Thank you."

Steve only nods and returns to his task, quietly walking down the hall until he reaches Roni's room. The door is open, so he merely nudges it more so he can comfortably enter.

Roni is sleeping on the left side of her bed, facing her vanity. While her body is relaxed, she's frowning in her sleep, cheeks damp from drying tears. Her blonde curls are even messier than usual, and he moves a hand from the flowers to brush it off her face, his stomach fluttering when her lips twitch upwards in a small smile.

After a few seconds of watching her sleep, he returns to his task. There's enough space on her bedside table for Steve to set down the flowers. He wants them to be one of the first things she sees when she wakes up. He hopes they make her smile, if only for a moment. He also really hopes she still loves gardenias.

He turns around and notices Dustin standing in the open doorway. As he walks over to the youngest Henderson, his eyes drift over to Roni's desk. The Purple Heart her father sent her hands above it, next to some framed pressed flowers. He's never really paid attention to them before, always focused on something else.

He recognizes them immediately, though, as soon as he sees them. Dustin nods like he understands - the kid probably does, he knows Roni the best.

Steve leaves her room, only keeping the door open an inch. Dustin waits for him, eyes forlornly focused on the wood in front of them. "She used to touch the petals every thirty seconds, like she was afraid they'd just disappeared. She'd never pressed anything before, so I showed her how."

Steve smiles at the exposition. "She really loves me, huh?"

"Yeah. Yeah, she does." Dustin nudges him. "Want hot chocolate? There should be some left."

"Sure, Henderson." Steve grins down at the younger male, who returns the gesture and leads him back to the kitchen. Both stop when they see Nancy and Jonathan moving about. "Where are you two going?" Steve asks, a little concerned.

"Sally's. For food. And, uh, a quick drive before." Nancy answers, looking far away.

"You okay here?" Jonathan asks, eyes flicking over to the hall.

"Yeah. Yes. You two... take your time."

Nancy makes a small noise then rushes over to him, and Steve has no choice but to hug her back. It's friendly, and so different than any other hug they'd shared back when they were *together*. Somehow this

feels even better.

After a few silent minutes she steps away from him, and for a second there's a smile on her face. "Take care of our girl."

"Always." Steve smiles back and watches the couple leave, promising Claudia to be back with enough dinner for the six of them. Mrs. Henderson waves them off with a soft smile, then sits down at the kitchen table. Dustin stirs the pot of cocoa, and Steve watches him carefully, having witnessed the youngest Henderson nearly set the kitchen on fire more than enough times.

A soft, hitched breath gets his attention, and Steve turns to see tears rolling down Mrs. Henderson's face. Her shoulders shake as she muffled her sobs in her hands. Dustin turns off the stove and rushes over to hold his mom while the older male looks on, unsure of what to do. Should he stay? Should he give them space?

"My baby. Oh, my poor baby." Claudia whimpers. "I don't know what to do. I-I don't know how to help her."

Dustin just looks up at Steve, round blue eyes unsure of what to do and brimming with tears. He's just a kid, Steve thinks. He shouldn't know what to do. And not for the first time, Steve wants nothing more than to *kill* the people responsible for all this pain. That kind of rage should terrify him, but as he watches a little boy try to comfort his mother and remembers all the people who still don't have closure for their pain, he thinks it's more than justifiable.

So Steve gathers all the courage he has and walks over to the mom and son, pulling out a chair so he's right next to the sobbing Claudia Henderson. She's so strong - hell, it's clear Roni and Dustin got their strength from her - and he wonders if she's let herself break down until now. Or is Roni enough like her that both women did their best to keep their pain to themselves?

He puts a hand on Claudia's, and sends a comforting look Dustin's way. "All we can really do is be here. For each other." He clears his throat. "You three are some of the strongest people I've ever met, and... and it's okay not to know what to do."

Claudia sniffles and raises her head, wiping away her tears. She moves her other hand to cover Steve's, squeezing it in a way so motherly that the teen is reminded how very different the Henderson matriarch is from his own mother. "Thank you, Steve." She coughs wetly then stands up, Steve following her. "I'm just... I'm going to lie down for a little bit. Let me know if you need me, or if... if Veronica is asking for me."

Steve and Dustin watch the shaky woman walk away, her sniffles fading as she closes her bedroom door behind her. The older teen sighs then pushes his bangs back, chest aching. "Hey, bud, why don't we -" He looks down at Dustin and can feel his eyes bulge when he notices the youngest Henderson's face dripping with tears. "Oh, man, come here." Steve pulls Dustin into his chest, both boys wrapped around each other so brotherly it makes Steve feel all warm. Like he always had this, a little brother or whatever. He doesn't even care that snot and salty water are staining his thick cashmere sweater. Besides, he knows his own tears are raining down on top of Dustin's head. "It's gonna be okay, kid. It's gonna be okay." He promises, and they break down together.

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### *Veronica's POV...*

My room is painted gold when my eyes begin to flick open, the edges still blurry and a little dark. I don't know how long I've been asleep - is it even the same day? - but I feel a little less heavy.

The heaviness fades more when I rub my eyes and open them all the way, a beautiful vase of gardenias filling my vision. The white leaves shine brighter in the sunlight, and I sit up so I can just touch one. Make sure their real.

They definitely weren't there when Jonathan tucked me in, so who the hell brought them?

"Oh, you're awake."

I gasp inaudibly and shift my body so I'm staring through my open doorway. Steve's half-in/half-out of the room, looking relatively surprised. "Steve. Hi." I whisper hoarsely, voice dry from sleep and



how little I've spoken.

"Roni. I was just checking, to, uh... to see if you were still sleeping."

"I just woke up. Um, what time is it?"

"Almost 5. You've been out for a couple of hours, I guess."

"Where's Nance? And Jonathan?" I ask, scooting back but holding on tightly to my comforter.

"They went out for a drive, and to pick up some food."

I let out a sigh of relief, managing a small smile. "Good. Nance needed... she needs to be able to deal, too. Without me being the way I am."

"Roni -"

"No, it's okay. I'm a mess." I brush my tangled hair back and grimace when my fingers get stuck. "You can come in, you know." I whisper and he clears his throat, rubbing the back of his neck as he enters my room. I look down at my comforter and pat the spot to my right. "Sit. If you want. Or... it's cold. You can come under the covers."

"Are you sure?" He asks, walking around the foot of the bed. I nod and flip them down. He crawls under them, shivering a little in just his jeans, socks, and a polo. "Thanks. My sweater got a little ruined, and Dustin doesn't wear the same size clothes as me." I snort a little and scoot back down, resting my head on the pillow. "I heard you had a rough day."

"Who told you? Nancy? My mom?"

"Dustin."

"Oh."

"Yeah. Are you... are you feeling a little better? Not, like, perfect and happy, but... better?" Steve stammers. I turn my head away from him briefly to stare up at my favorite flowers.

"I actually think I am." I face him once more, and pat my hand on his pillow. He accepts the offer and lies down on his side, smiling softly at me. "I guess those were your errand?"

"Mhmm. Thought they'd... I hoped they'd help. A little. Enough."

"They already have. Thank you."

"You deserve to wake up to something that you love." He mumbles, and I shift a little closer to him, still laying on my right side.

"Well it's a good thing you know what I love."

He grins and comes closer, and we're only a few inches apart. "I only had the past six years to figure it out." He yawns a little, facing his head away from me, and I watch him glow in the fading sunlight. For the hundredth time today, I feel like this heavy weight on everyone, like I'm taking from them without giving anything in return except misery.

"You can go. If you know, you have to be somewhere else. Or if you need to rest. Your face looks a little better." I murmur off-topic, eyes roving over the fading bruises and healing cuts.

"Where else would I need to be?" I shrug at him.

"I don't know. I guess I'm just giving you an out." He blinks at me.

"Why?"

"You've checked up on me. I'm breathing. If you have other shit to do - like, take a nap or homework - you can go do it."

"Funny. I was under the impression that I was allowed to nap *here*, with *you*. What makes you think I have anywhere else to be?"

I shrug again, pillow soft against my cheek. "I guess I don't get why you're sticking around, Steve. I'm a mess, and right now... I don't want to be a burden on you, or anything."

"You aren't a burden. Besides, we're both messes. I'm 'sticking around' because I want to."

"But why?" I quietly plead, confused as to why anyone would want to be around me right now.

He breathes out and I watch his right hand reach ahead to cup my face, thumb brushing my high cheekbone. "I never told you about those four days you were missing, huh?" I shake my head. "Well, it was... it was bad, Roni." His eyes widen. "Shit, I mean -"

"No, no. Tell me." I stop him, head moving all the more into his hand. He nods.

"Well, Nance asked at lunch if me, Tommy and Carol had seen you or Barb around school. We hadn't, and that whole day I felt weird. Like something was wrong. And then Nancy told me she'd called the Hollands, who said they hadn't seen Barb. I... Roni, I was such a jerk. I didn't want to say anything about you guys being at my place because I was too scared of my dad laying into me." He roughly admits, eyes getting wet as he looks over my shoulder. "Like, that was my first reaction because I was such a dick back then."

"Steve -"

"That changed when she told me you were missing, too." Hazel eyes refocus on me, and they're so breathtakingly clear. "She was walking away when she told me, and Tommy found me having a panic attack in the alley by the basketball court. I'm not saying I didn't care about Barb's safety, but I knew... I knew if you were missing, then Nancy was right to be worried. I spent the first two nights you were gone searching the woods in my backyard. Tommy found me freezing my ass off by my pool the morning after and pretty much had to force-feed me. And the whole time I looked for you, all I could think about was you lying somewhere dead. I thought you were dead for four days. It was the worst thing I ever had to go through. So when I saw you behind the Hawk... Roni, I thought I was dreaming. But of course you'd be around to watch me be an asshole." He shakes his head at himself and smiles at me. "You looked so *badass*, Roni. Like some superhero, and you took my breath away."

His thumb strokes my cheek and I remember him doing the same thing that day, in-between him and Jonathan trading blows. "So I *need* to be here, because I woke up this morning afraid you *weren't*. I

can't lose you." He admits quietly, like it's the greatest secret in the history of the world.

I clear my throat a little, then read his darkened eyes. It only takes a few seconds to find what I'm looking for. "If I asked you to hold me, would you say yes."

"Yes." He breathes out.

"Then *please* hold me." I whisper.

His resolve to keep some distance snaps like a rubber band as his right hand lowers to grab my waist - mindful of the fading bruises on my ribs - and tugs me into him, my head on his chest and our legs tangled together. My breath catches as his lips land on my forehead, his left hand holding his head up as he looks down at me. My left arm comes up to hold onto the collar of his polo, playing with the soft fabric a bit.

"The kids called 30 minutes ago. And Joyce, and Hopper." Steve tells me. "I'm surprised you didn't wake up with how loud the phone and walkies were."

"Tired. Call them later?"

"When you're ready to, Roni. And Tina asked about you earlier, in school." I murmur a little. "And Nance. Wanted to make sure you knew she's thinking about you."

"That's nice of her." I smile, nuzzling into his chest some more.

"Yeah, a lot of people asked about you. It's like you're popular or something." I snort at the heavy sarcasm, smiling when he kisses my cheek. "Oh, and get this - Tommy asked about you, too." I pull back a bit and stare up at him in shock. He just nods. "Yeah, I made that face too. He *and* Carol hope you feel better."

"Huh."

"Yeah. But wait, there's more - he said he thought you were *always* cool."

"No way."

"Yes way."

I smirk. "Do you think he realizes he made a pun? Ice Queen, *cool*."

"Well, everyone knows you like puns, so probably."

"If he weren't a total douchebag I'd be more inclined to compliment him, too." Steve laughs. "I wasn't kidding, Steven."

"No, I know. That's why I'm laughing." He sobers up a bit. "I mean, he's not completely awful. He checked in on me, too."

"Oh." I blink up at him. "Then I guess he's got some redeeming qualities." I yawn, pressing my forehead into Steve's collarbone. He pulls me into him even more, and our closeness is a comfort rather than something I want to shove away.

"Is this okay? It isn't too much?" He asks, and I shake my head.

"No. I feel safe. You make me feel safe."

Lips press down on the top of my head. "So do you." Is mumbled into my curls. His chest vibrates, and it takes a few moments to realize he's humming 'Boogie Woogie Bugle Boy'. I join him, lips curling into a small smile.

Creaking floorboards tear me from the moment, and I gently lift my head to see my mom sneaking past my room. Our eyes somehow meet and she only smiles in what must be relief. "Hey, c'mon. Close your eyes. Sleep time, *Ronniekins*." Steve mumbles tiredly, and I roll my eyes. "I'll be here when you wake up." He tiredly finishes, voice sounding far away. The movements of his chest as he breathes soothes me, and the beating of his heart is the best kind of lullabye a girl could ask for.

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Waking up in Steve's arms is a revelation. Of course, my first thought as my eyes blinked open was my mom had put the heavy blanket over me. It wasn't until I looked down and saw an arm crossed over my stomach that I remembered who's in my bed. Somehow during

our nap Steve ended up on his front, the left side of his face pressed into the pillow and his right leg thrown over mine. His left arm is awkwardly bent over his head like he's posing for a magazine or someshit, but it's the soft smile on his face that really grabs my attention. He looks a little like a cherub, cheeks flushed pink and lashes enviously long. They flutter as his eyes move under his closed lids.

I find myself lifting my left arm to stroke the limb holding me down to the bed, our bodies still covered by warm blankets and a fluffy comforter. My fingers run lazily up and down his arm, drawing invisible designs as they move. I close my eyes again briefly, ears catching onto light voices coming in through my open doorway. I yawn silently, ready to wake up, and find Steve blinking rapidly, eyes fighting off exhaustion as he wakes up.

"Hi." I whisper when Steve's finally alert, and he grins at me, nuzzling his head closer to mine.

"Hey." Plump lips kiss my cheek, the tip of my nose, my temple. "You ready to get up, or do you want to sleep some more."

"Been sleeping all day, handsome. 'Sides, think we have company." I nod towards the door and he sighs forlornly.

"Well, if we have to, I guess we can get up." Steve's stomach growls and I laugh at the timing.

"Looks like we have to, Teddy Bear." I tease, remembering the promise I'd made on Monday in the hospital."

He groans and pinches my hip, and regrettably a giggle escapes. "You suck, blonde Gremlin."

"Hey." I smack at his back and he smirks.

"If you can call me 'Teddy Bear' I can call you that."

"Whatever. Let's just see what's going on. Need to move." I mumble, the reality of today crashing down once more.

He nods and rolls over, getting up with small groans and stretching

out. I shiver as I kick away the covers and slowly crawl out of bed, Steve there to catch me when I almost fall, legs pretty much asleep. "Whoa, I've got you." He mutters, and his arm wraps around my hip, shouldering my weight as we walk away from my room and towards the kitchen.

Nancy sees me first, and I leave Steve to pull her into a hug her, more ready to support her than I'd been earlier. All that sleep, it didn't fix my emotions or anything, but I feel more aware, less on edge.

"Guess what I got?" Nancy asks, and I sniff the air like a bloodhound, then gasp.

"No."

"Yes."

I grin and pull away from her, attention focused on the kitchen table covered in food from Sally's Place. Burgers, fries, onion rings. Club sandwiches. Milkshakes, strawberry and chocolate. There's seven though, and I cover my mouth, arm wrapped around Nancy's shoulders. "One for Barb."

"One for Barb." She confirms, and I look over to my brother and mom. They're staring at me worriedly, and it takes three steps to get to them. I hug Dustin first, murmuring small apologies in his curls that get brushed aside. Then I'm wrapped around my mom, her hand running through my hair like I'm the late beloved Mews.

"How do you feel?"

"Better. What about you? Are you okay? I should've asked sooner, but \_"

"Oh, no honey, shh. *Shh*. I'm fine." She insists, but even a blind person could see how pained her eyes are. "Now that I can see your beautiful smile, I'm better."

I smile wider at her words and kiss her cheek. "I love you, mom."

"I love you too, dumpling."

"Do you feel a little underappreciated?" Jonathan asks behind us, and I turn to see him talking to Steve, who shakes his head while smirking amusedly. "Just me? Awesome."

Rolling my eyes a bit I cross over to hug him. "You know I love you, you dramatic bitch."

"Rude, Ver." Jonathan mumbles, and I nod into his chest.

After a few more seconds we break apart, then the others reach out for their food. I'm still not hungry, but I manage to drink a third of my strawberry milkshake and steal a handful of fries from Steve's plate. It fills me up, and while Steve seems seconds away from shoving a hamburger down my throat, Nancy, Dustin and my mom are just relieved I have something in my stomach again. The nausea faded during my nap, but I still don't want to chance it.

Barb's strawberry milkshake goes untouched, sitting in the center of the table. I wrinkle my nose as Steve slurps his chocolate shake through the thick straw, Dustin enthusiastically joining him.

Yeah, have I mentioned my dislike for chocolate shakes? Steve's just lucky I love him.

As the boys talk and mom attempts to slow down Dustin's food intake, Nance and I disappear into the living room. "We should call them now, right? We've given them time for themselves?" Nancy asks me, and I bite my lip.

"We need to. I need to. They shouldn't just have each other."

"Yeah. This is going to be rough, isn't it?" I only nod and dial the memorized number, holding up the handset between Nancy and I so we can both hear.

Marsha Holland picks up on the third ring, voice thick. ***"Ho-Holland residence."***

"Hi, Mrs. Holland."

"Hey, Marsha." Nancy and I greet the older woman, who lets out a sigh of relief.



***"Oh, oh my girls. Hello."***

"We just... we wanted to check in." Nancy responds.

***"That's so kind. Thank you."***

"We would've called earlier, but we didn't... we didn't want to..." I trail off.

***"No, it's fine Veronica. Thank you."***

Guilt seizes in my chest. She shouldn't be thanking me, hell she wouldn't be in mourning at all if I'd just been quicker -

***"... and it really means a lot."*** Nancy nudges me, noticing I've lost focus.

"Well, we just wanted you to know we're here."

***"You girls have been a godsend."*** Mr. Holland's voice gruffs out through the phone. ***"Our Barb is so lucky to have friends like you."***

*She was lucky, yes.*

"I think we're luckier." I comment, realizing I haven't spoken in a little while.

***"How are you holding up, Veronica?"*** Marsha asks.

"Alright." Not great. Horribly.

***"I hope you know we care deeply for you."*** Mrs. Holland tells me. ***"I don't want you to feel... don't feel guilty for anything, alright sweetheart? Not after all you've helped us with."***

***"We're here for you, Veronica. We hope you know that."*** Mr. Holland adds. ***"You too, Nancy. We could do dinner again next week. The house is a little crowded what with the boxes we've been packing, but -"***

"That'd be great." I answer, chest loosening a bit.

"Of course. Just give us a time and date, and we'll be there."

***"Perfect."*** Mrs. Holland replies, then clears her throat. ***"I'm sorry, but we have to go. A few friends are on their way for a visit, and -"***

"Oh, it's okay. It's fine. Um... call, if you need anything. Either one of us." Nancy promises.

***"You two can do the same. Goodnight, girls. We'll call about dinner on... on Saturday."*** Mr. Holland tells us.

"Sounds good. Have a... feel better." I amend, and the Hollands offer the same before hanging up. Nance and I hold onto each other again, crying together again. This time though, it feels less like drowning. It's more like holding and learning to let go all at once. It's the kind of tears you spill when you accept it's time to move on. Not forget. It's like she said in Steve's bathroom last year, when she was still alive and we were both naive to the horrors life would throw our way. "People always leave, Veronica. But you know what we do about it? We keep moving on. We prove to the world we're more than just the forgotten. Okay?"

*Okay, Barb. Here's to moving on.*

## 20. Sixteen Going on Seventeen

**FINALLY, SHE'S BACK...**

**WITH A HAPPY CHAPTER? Can it truly be?**

Yes. This is a happy one. And a LONG one. The next one will be a happy one, and the next one if I split the Snow Ball and Christmas into a two-parter. Let me know if you want that, BTW, or if you want both things in the next upload. The one after that will be happy with your regularly scheduled angst session - not super angry, but this is still a show/fic/thing with teenagers so it's bound to happen.

Anyway, this is the promised Thanksgiving and Birthday special! I wanted to have it up on Thanksgiving, but that clearly didn't happen. The next chapter will (fingers crossed) be uploaded before Christmas. I got this.

Thank you to all my readers for sticking with me! And thanks for being patient, I know it's been a hot minute. This chapter is all love and friendship. We've got cute scenes with everyone, El's included, and Veronica's presents are freaking awesome. And yes, Jonathan can afford the gift he gets her. He works hard and he loves his pseudo-sister, and this is a gift for him, too. I also finally mentioned the fact Claudia and Joyce are friends, and were close before their husbands dickishness took over and forced them to work even harder than they already did. I figured they must have been close, considering their husbands are pals and their kids have been friends their whole lives. I'm giving those two wonderful moms more friends. I'm also going to add in more of the Sinclairs and Erica. She's also in this chapter - well, she's mentioned, but it isn't in passing. She's her usual sassy self. Jonathan and Nancy talk some sense into Veronica, Steve has to answer that age-old "what are you doing after high school?" question that gets asked on Thanksgiving. And because we've all been slow-burned enough, this baby's finally gonna catch fire - ironic, given the title of my fic - and my babies will finally get together. How are we feeling about "Steronica"? "Stroni"? Whatever, y'all let me know if you've even thought

about a couple name for them.

As always, I only own Veronica. I hope you enjoy this chapter!

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It's been two weeks since El closed the gate. Two weeks since Will was freed from the Mind Flayer's control, two weeks since my powers went dormant and I learned how to breathe again. I mourned Barb and Bob, I've had nightmares that I can now wholeheartedly claim are *just nightmares*, and the world's kept spinning.

It's different this time around. The trauma. Not easier, or better, but different. Maybe because I'm at the point where I know it's okay to move on instead of just saying it and pretending. I'm not alright, I'm still scared and sad. And yes, there's this darkness in me, has been for over a year. I'm not letting it dictate how I choose to live my life anymore. I'm not letting it consume me. But when I find myself slipping, when I feel that darkness sinking its sharp teeth and talons into me, I look to the people I love. My family, my friends, *Steve*.

Maybe that's why it's been different this time around. I'm reminding myself of the good, instead of holding onto the bad.

It wouldn't be Hawkins without bizarre changes, though. Take Tommy H and Steve. Inseparable until November of last year, you could imagine the student body's surprise when they greeted each other in the cafeteria with friendly quips rather than threats of flying fists. They aren't best friends, they aren't even close to being close friends, but it's nice to see. This isn't to say Tommy's "flipped a switch" internally - he's still a dick, but now he's a *tolerable* dick. Or maybe I've had more time to be patient now that I don't constantly think I'm losing my mind.

Carol, though? Now that's been the weirdest, most welcome change. It came the Monday after the anniversary, in the second-floor girls' bathroom.

*I checked my reflection in the bathroom mirror, leaning forward too much and pulling my torso taught. I grimaced at the twinge of pain and stepped back, lifting my shirt. The bruises were fading, but the one from Billy's elbow was still large and irritatingly in the way.*

*"Holy shit!"*

*I jumped at the shrill shriek and turned to see Carol standing at the entrance of the bathroom, door slamming behind her. I shoved down my shirt quickly and went to grab my bag. "Been taking self-defense classes." I try out, the lie slipping through my teeth easily.*

*"Did he do that to you?" She asked, mouth snapping shut when she heard the concern in her voice. I just blinked. "Did Hargrove hurt you?"*

*"No, uh -"*

*"Holy fuck, that makes... Jesus, I was wondering why you two even went splitsville, especially with Billy still so obviously into you."*

*"Carol, seriously, it's nothing."*

*She raised an eyebrow and crosses her arms, thoroughly unimpressed. "Yeah, I don't think so." I scoffed and rolled my eyes. "I think Billy saw you with Steve and lost it on Harrington. I bet you got between them."*

*"Almost. I wasn't... I wasn't with Steve. Not like that."*

*"I know." I watched her read me. "You wouldn't have done that to Billy." I bit my lip and looked away, arms still crossed. "He didn't break anything, right?"*

*"It was an accident. And you can't say anything." I warned frostily.*

*She held out her hands. "Not this time, I won't. Anyway, we still have our truce." She shrugged like it was no big deal.*

*I actually smiled. "Tommy spilled the beans to Steve. I know you two actually like me."*

*Carol groaned and rolled her eyes. "God, I'm dating a dumbass."*

*"Hey, you said it."*

*Carol snorted. "Yeah, yeah." We broke into silence, and I played with the strap on my backpack. "I'm... glad you're doing better."*

*"Careful, Carol, other people might think you have a heart."*

*"Just don't tell anyone. I've got a reputation to maintain. But since Tommy blew my cover, do you need me to get you some ice?"*

*"I'm okay, but... Thank you, Carol. You don't totally suck, either."*

*She grinned and flicked her hair to the side, cocky grin a little less infuriating. "Only where it counts." That prompted a laugh from me, and five minutes later three sophomores were given the surprise of age-old enemies bonding in a dirty high school bathroom.*

And look, it's not like we're having slumber parties or shit, but we talk to each other *outside* of school. It's done wonders for school life, Tommy and Carol being less irritating. Them relaxing means I don't constantly have to be on guard for a verbal spar or ready to fight with their crew of jackasses and airheads - Tina not included. I still can't stand Vicki and Nicole, but those girls are thankfully too busy challenging each other - and most of the female population of Hawkin's - for a certain California boy's affection.

So far, he's kept his unwanted promise to me. He stays away, he doesn't say anything to me, or Nancy and Jonathan, or even Steve. The only exception is basketball, where they've been put on the same team every practice so the coach can no longer be concerned about either one of them getting messed up more than they were before - Steve's words. So yeah, Billy will call out plays to him but beyond that... nothing. Not that Steve minds. His forehead's still healing.

If we pass each other in the halls, Billy will move out of the way and make it look like he's trying to hassle someone, but I see right through him. It's his way of "submitting" without his followers thinking he's soft or some macho shit like that. Hell, he won't even look my way. Not a glare, or a pout, or an awkward wave. This isn't even just at school. Max has been coming over to mine and Dustin's since the weekend after the anniversary. Billy doesn't even get out of the car, parking at the edge of my driveway and peeling away when Max is out of the way.

Look, what we had... it wasn't love. It could've been, if things hadn't gone down the way they did. But he was - is - important to me. I

worry about him, especially because I know all about who his dad really is. I rely on Max for information on my ex; how he's been doing, if he's been hurting her. Aside from driving the redhead to school and around town, Billy hasn't broken his promise. While Max's own walls have crumbled thanks to it, she gets this look on her face sometimes when he isn't looking or has left her behind. Like she doesn't know if it'll be the last time she sees him. One time she nearly panicked when her mom picked her up from my house instead of her stepbrother. She told me the next day he'd been at home cooking dinner because he *asked if he could*, then mumbled something about the deliciousness of chocolate cake.

I guess I've learned that when it comes to Billy, relationships with him are complicated. You can care about him all you want, but you're also going to be a little angry that you do. I am, and more than that I'm pissed that for all the kindness he showed me, he refuses to treat other people the same way. He can be good - I know he can be - but he just. Won't.

Other than all of that, life's been smooth as Jif's peanut butter. It's something to be thankful for.

Which is only fitting, since it's Thanksgiving and this year there's no cast limiting my movement. I'm injury free and ready to dance around the kitchen like a lunatic.

"Veronica, Steve's on the phone!" My mom shouts down the hall and I hide my squeal behind my hand, slipping around the wood floor in my haste to get to her, fuzzy socks doing me no favors other than keeping my feet toasty-warm. "Here she is, dear."

I try to still my rapidly beating heart and hold the phone up to my ear. "Hey, Steven."

*"Oh, I get it. When the danger's over we're back to 'Steven', huh Veronica?"*

I grin and bite my lip. "Maybe."

***"You aren't as cute as you think."***

"That's because I think I'm beautiful."

**"No, you're gorgeous."** I laugh breathlessly as he coughs on the other end. **"I mean, I -"**

"What're you calling about, Steve?"

**"Uh, the, uh... the stuffing. I'm just making stuffing, right?"**

"And the mashed potatoes! You promised to make them this year." I remind him, mind briefly flashing back to this time last year, when we decided Steve coming over for Thanksgiving would be the new tradition.

**"Yeah, yeah, okay. I make -"**

"Some mean mashed potatoes', I know, baby."

He snorts. **"Shut up, Roni."**

"Make me, handsome."

"Gross." I jump at my brother's grumpy complaint, and he rubs the sleep out of his eyes. "Morning Steve!" He shouts and I jump again, this time at the volume.

Steve laughs some more. **"Tell the dipshit I said good morning, too."**

"He said 'ditto, dipshit.'" I paraphrase. My brother grins then walks away, shaking his head.

**"Rude, Roni."**

"Take it up with my lawyer. Anything else to ask me?"

**"Nope. I'll be over at 5, princess."**

"See you then." I make to hang up, but he stops me.

**"And, uh, Roni?"**

"Yeah baby?" I ask, the nickname slipping out once more.



***"Wear the green dress. If you still have it."*** He hangs up and I'm left a blushing mess, feeling very much like a prepubescent girl with a crush and less like the Ice Queen I made myself become.

"So, what did Steve want?" My mom asks as I walk into the kitchen, heading straight for the coffee.

"Oh, he just wanted to confirm the, uh, time. And what he's making."

"Yeah, that's all he wanted to do." My brother sasses and before I can react my mom slaps her dishcloth playfully at him.

"Dusty!" She scolds and I laugh as he rubs his shoulder.

"What else would he have wanted, D?" I ask innocently.

"You know, mom knows, we all know. It's gross." He grumbles. My mom and I look at each other and begin to quietly laugh, knowing we've failed when Dustin throws his arms up and marches back to his room.

"Why don't you finish your coffee and then get started on the pretzel rolls? I'm going to make this darn cranberry sauce." My mom finally announces, and I watch her to get to work, heart bursting with unspoken happiness.

---

Nearly seven hours later, the house is completely warm, smelling as amazing as it has every prior Thanksgiving. Dustin's begrudgingly allowed mom to boss him into wearing a nice blue button-down and slacks, his gross sneakers traded for dress shoes. Mom's in a soft burgundy dress, hair curled and pinned into a bun. She's always beautiful, but it hurts to see her look this good and remember what my dad did to her.

I pace back and forth in the living room, white closed-toe heels clicking on the floor and the skirt of my green lace dress swishing around. It's a little before 5 o'clock so it isn't like Steve's late, but my whole body is vibrating, every nerve pulsing with excess energy. "Relax, Leia, he'll be here soon." My brother rolls his eyes, but he's smiling and looking at the clock with anticipation.

"Oh, like you aren't excited, either!" I growl.

"Veronica and Dustin, you be nice to each other before I throw out this pumpkin pie!"

Dustin and I gulp. "Sorry."

"Our bad, mom." He and I amend, right as the doorbell rings.

"Oh God, I'm going to throw up. Do I look good? I look good, right?" I ask my mom and Dustin.

"Yes!" My younger brother exclaims, and I nervously tuck my long blonde curls behind my ears as our mom opens the door.

"Steve! It's so good to see you again, dear. Let me take those dishes."

"Thanks. You too, Claudia." Steve responds, and I almost dash towards the hall to hide for a bit when Dustin stops me, shaking his head like he's suddenly an unamused adult. "Henderson! Hey buddy, I... wow." He looks past my brother's shoulder and blinks at me, and I force my blush away. "Yo-you look great. Beautiful. Uh, I like your dress?"

Dustin looks between us, snorts, then walks over to assess the two bouquets in Steve's hands.

"What, no flowers for me?"

Steve glares down at him, but his lips twitch like he's about to smile. "Next time, buddy. How do you feel about roses? Maybe lilies?"

"No thanks, I'm good."

My mom laughs as she passes us, carrying two large Tupperware containers. "Dusty, quit teasing our guest. And bring me Steve's Thanksgiving bouquet - it deserves to be our centerpiece!"

I smile as Dustin snaps into action, probably still concerned mom's going to ban him from touching the pumpkin pie. Steve doesn't meet my little brother's eyes as he hands over the more colorful flowers, and Dustin gives me this mockingly-cute face, jumping away when I

lunge towards him.

Steve clears his throat and I face him, smiling up at the older teen softly. "These are for you."

I grin and accept the gardenias, taking in their sweet scent. "Thank you. The ones you got a couple of weeks ago finally bit the dust. Literally. You going to get me another bouquet on Saturday?"

Steve rolls his eyes and comes closer, a hand on each of my hips. "Maybe. Or maybe I'll get you sixteen more so you've got your seventeen."

"You gonna fill my room with gardenias?" I ask, still smiling up at him as he tugs me closer.

"That a challenge, gorgeous?" I wink and laugh as he bends down, kissing my forehead and then my cheek. "I could, you know. No problem."

"Bet the florist'll be even happier."

"Please, I'm Ms. Harper's best customer." He pulls away from me a bit, hands still in their place as his thumbs stroke the lace fabric covering my hips. "You sleep okay?"

I shrug and lean up, kissing his cheek. "If I had a nightmare, I don't remember it."

"Good." His hand raises to tug at the ends of my curls, gentle. "Let's keep it that way."

"You're preaching to the choir there, but sure." He rolls his eyes and steps away from me, slipping his arm around my shoulders as I lead him into the kitchen.

"You're a menace, you know that?"

"An absolute hellion."

"The worst."

"Ouch."

Soft lips press against the scar on my temple. "The best. The greatest."

"Stop it." I groan, slapping his chest half-heartedly.

"Oh, excellent, I'll put these in water too." My mom interrupts us, stealing the bouquet from my hands with a conniving wink.

Let it be known that Claudia Henderson is as trouble-making as her children.

"Mom, come on, I'm goddamn starving right now! It's ten past five, can we eat yet?!" Dusty complains from the dining room table.

"Dustin Henderson, you watch that mouth of yours!" My mom shouts back, absentmindedly handing me the vase as she storms over to deal with my brother. "Dusty, if you even think about touching those rolls \_"

"I wasn't! Oh my God!" As my mom and brother argue I nod my head to my bedroom and Steve snorts, trailing after me.

Like before, I put the vase on my bedside table. "Excited for your second Thanksgiving with the Hendersons?"

"You've got no idea. I've been looking forward to it all year." I turn and grin up at him. "What can I say? Your mom makes the best pumpkin pie."

I pout and kick at his shin lightly. "Mean."

"Yeah, you're right. I was mainly looking forward to Dustin's rants about Cells and Monsters or whatever."

*"Dungeons and Dragons."*

"Nerd."

"By association!"

"Uh-huh. Right." I narrow my eyes at his playful look of disbelief.

"Were you looking forward to anything else?" I ask, stepping a little closer to him, hands clasped behind my back.

He shrugs, then begins counting off different reasons with his fingers. "Maybe one of the *Star Wars* movie. The one with the teddy bears. Dustin's brussel sprouts burps. Ooh, hot apple cider, definitely the leftovers-" I roll my eyes at his teasing, and he stops, pulling me into him so my hands are braced in his chest, curling into the green fabric of his fluffy sweater.

Oh. We match. I dumbly think to myself.

"You in this dress. That's what I was most looking forward to."

"Steve."

He gives me a soft look and starts to lean down. "Roni."

"Assholes, c'mon, it's time to - whoops." Steve and I step away from each other, Dustin pointedly looking above our heads. "Dinner. It's dinner. Sorry, my bad. Um... bye." He skitters off and I sigh, two strong arms wrapping around my waist from behind.

"Well, we should go join them. Do I have to worry about fighting Dustin to sit next to you?"

I shake my head and giggle as we walk out of my room like that - Steve's arms still around my waist with me leading the way. "You could take him."

"He's just lucky I didn't bring my nail-bat."

*Lie.* It's in his trunk. I saw it yesterday when he picked me up from work.

"Mhm. I know you actually like him."

"He's my second-favorite Henderson. Your mom has all my love."

I roll my eyes and playfully push him away, but let him tug me to the dining room nonetheless. My mom's standing up, Dustin seated next to her and nervously looking at the sharp knife in her hand, poised to

carve the turkey. Steve lets go of me, and I think he's embarrassed at us being caught until he pulls out my chair and pushes me into the table, all chivalrous. He sits next to me after offering to help my mom, who shushes him. She begins to carve the turkey, making happy noises and noting it's perfectly cooked. My brother's licking his lips like some kind of wild animal and I catch Steve laughing into his hand from the corner of my eye.

When she's finished, my mom sits down. Just as Dustin is reaching for a piece of meat, she takes his hand and stops him. "Before we dig in, I'd just like to say a few words." My brother groans then jolts a bit, and I realize it's because Steve kicked him. "Oh, Dusty, patience is a virtue." He grumbles, yelping when Steve kicks him *again*. "Last year was... it was difficult, to put it simply. I think we were all mostly thankful that Veronica made it home." My mom's voice breaks and my eyes well up with tears. A large hand grabs my smaller limb and I look over to see Steve staring down at me, his own hazel eyes wet. "We haven't done this in years, but I'd like for all of us to say something we're thankful for. And no, Dustin, this meal does not count." She preemptively warns, and I grin. "I'll go first. While I miss Mews dearly," I glare at Dustin who returns it with a guilty grimace, "I'm thankful that both of my children are healthy and *happier*, and I'm thankful Steve could join us again."

Steve blushes a little, but he's still holding my hand. "I guess I'll go. Um, I'm also thankful I get to spend Thanksgiving here, again. I'm thankful that Dustin and I are friends."

"Aw, *buddy*." Dustin blushes, and I snort.

"And I'm thankful for Roni. For being here." He awkwardly adds, clearing his throat. My mom sends me a conspicuous wink and I blush deeper than my younger brother.

Dustin is side-eying the food, but gives into my mom's request.

"I'm, uh, thankful for my family, and new friends." He pointedly stares at Steve. "And the food, mom. I'm *starving*." Dustin can't help himself, but my mom's in too good a mood to care.

Everyone looks at me and Steve squeezes my hand. "I'm thankful to

be here. I'm thankful for everything that's happened this year, bad and good." I smile over at my little brother. "I'm thankful for all the love and patience that's been given to me." My mom sends me a teary grin, and I look up at Steve. "I'm thankful for the people who make me happy." He gives me a soft look, thumb rubbing over the back of my hand. I look back over at my mom and brother. "Also this food. I think we'd all be thankful if D was eating - less chance of a tantrum."

My mom lets out a wet laugh as my little brother makes an offended noise, but he doesn't stop her from piling his plate high with every dish on the table. Much to mine and Steve's chagrin Dustin grabs nearly a quarter of the brussel sprouts, which means he's going to be gassy the rest of the night. I'm not sitting next to him on the couch, that's for damn sure.

"Holy shifth Svehve." I get out as I take in a forkful of the best mashed potatoes I've ever had. They're creamy, but not liquidy, buttery and garlicky with subtle herbs. "So good." I finally swallow, mouth no longer full. His ears turn red when my mom wholeheartedly agrees.

"Thanks. It's my grandma's recipe."

"Well they're fu-"

"Dustin Henderson!" My mom warns.

"Sorry, Jesus. They're *freaking* good." He sticks his tongue out at her and she mimics him, eyes screwed shut tightly as she adds a mocking noise to it.

I shake my head at their antics and keep eating, practically shoving everything into my mouth thanks to my hunger. If I wasn't close with our guest I'd be completely grossed out with my lack of etiquette, we've seen each other covered in blood and monster goo. Hell, he watched me slit the throats of every demodog I managed to kill in the junkyard and that wasn't enough to scare him away.

"So, Steve, have you started thinking about your plans for next year?" Steve coughs on his piece of turkey and I quickly pat his back, handing the older teen his cup of water.

"Uh, well, I missed the early application deadline, but I still have time to meet the regular deadline." He awkwardly mutters, shifting slightly. He's holding himself confidently, eyes meeting my mom's with their usual softness, but I know what to look for. His knuckles curl up a bit and his tongue flicks out in a way that can be excused for wetting dry lips, but really means he's trying not to say something dickish.

I place my hand on his thigh, barely squeezing it. His knee starts to settle and his jaw moves a tick. "You wanted to look it over on Monday after school, right?" I pretend to remind him, even though we never made those plans.

In fact, any time I've tried to mention helping him, he's blown me off with a "Don't worry, my dad's been calling me to help."

Please, like John Harrington would ever stay on the phone for longer than five minutes to help his son. Nance only met Mr. Harrington twice in the year she and Steve dated, and that alone said enough about the man.

But now he can't turn down my offer. He knows it, too, his cheeks flushing with the frustrated kind of red - not in the "you're so hot and we're in public" way - in the "I will kill you" kind of way.

"Right. Yes."

"Will Mark let him occupy your time like that?" My mom asks me, but I don't look away from Steve who's pointedly taking a bite of roasted vegetables.

"I picked up the Tuesday shift instead." *I will.* "This is more important, anyway. Monday's are always slow."

"Yeah, you've complained enough about them. Where are you thinking of applying to, Steve?" My mom asks, but it's not in a nosy way. She's just trying to make gentle conversation.

He shrugs. "Indiana State. Chicago State. My dad went to Dartmouth, but that's a bit of a stretch for me." He says it like that doesn't matter, but I know it weighs him down, especially because I can easily infer



those were his old man's words. "There're may be some scouts coming in for basketball soon, but it all depends on how this season goes."

"That would be wonderful! But you know dear, it's also more than okay to take some time. I took off a year after I graduated high school, and it really did do wonders for me. Then again, Robert was also still fighting in Vietnam, so that definitely distracted me from my studies."

In the past, she would've said that clinically, like if my mom said it any other way she'd burst into tears. That's fine - no one in their right mind who knows how that relationship ended would judge her for it. It's just nice to see she's allowed herself to move on even more.

I can't help but wonder if she's ready to start dating. Maybe I'll get her a new cat, first. A new man can come later.

"Maybe. Dad's pretty adamant about me going somewhere for business. We've talked about me working for him, maybe even take over later on down the road."

"What does John do again?" My mom sips her red wine, and my fingers tap at his thigh to an unknown beat.

"My dad is the CEO of my grandfather's real estate investment company. He's out of town a lot now, expanding in different states and going to different meetings."

"I see. And how is your mom? I ran into her briefly a few weeks ago, she seemed a little stressed."

"She's good." Steve waves off her concern. "Yeah, dad's been trying to finish up this big deal for a property in New York, so the house has been a little hectic."

*No, baby, it's been empty. You've been sad, and I've been too scared to actually go in and keep you company.*

"Well, I hope it goes well for him. And I'm sure that whatever you decide for next year, it'll be the right choice *for you*." She sends him that all-seeing look of hers, reading him like he's one of her favorite romance novels, easily and with her full attention.

Steve breathes out quietly, giving my mom a warm smile at her reassurance. It's something he's needed from a parent for awhile now. Reassurance.

He looks at me and I smile, nodding my head in solidarity.

The moment is broken when Dustin belches louder than Chewbacca roars, immediately prompting a laugh from Steve.

My hand doesn't move from its place on his thigh.

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*3rd Person POV (Steve)...*

Ever since Mrs. Henderson asked him about his future, Steve's felt this lump in his throat. The last conversation he had with his dad was what - five days ago? John Harrington went in on him when Steve admitted he hadn't turned in his applications. His dad was so pissed any concern about his son - the insurance company finally got in contact with the older Mr. Harrington - was shoved out of the way.

Which, look, Steve knows he's an idiot. But he's not stupid enough to send in a shitty essay to go with an unhelpful side of shitty grades and poor academic decisions.

He isn't mad at Claudia, he knows she's just curious. He just wished he was smart enough to actually have a plan to talk about. Maybe he *should* take a year off and get his life together. He'd have to work for his dad, probably, but he could stay here. Be with the people who need him, who want him, who *love* him. And he could spend that time figuring out what he wants in life instead of rushing into something his dad expects him to do.

Roni's hand on his thigh keeps him grounded and as cool as her Ice Queen persona. She sends him small smiles as her mom and brother argue about vegetables, and he finds himself - *easily* - smiling back. Because he gets to have this, whatever *this* is, now. *Finally*.

As her mom leaves to finish up their dessert he helps the two Henderson siblings carefully clear the table, snorting when Dustin nearly drops the remaining turkey as he stumbles over his feet and

Roni calls him "Klutz Master" before she bumps into another chair and almost upends the cranberry sauce on her dress.

"That's karma, Leia!"

"Shut up, dipshit!"

"Veronica Leigh Henderson, you watch your language!" Dustin laughs and points at the scared look on his sister's face. She goes to kick at him and he squeals, dashing to the safety of the kitchen and Claudia Henderson's watchful eye without dropping a piece of meat.

Steve just watches the Henderson girl fondly, carrying the bulk of the table's contents. "What?" Roni asks when she catches him staring, and Steve doesn't even care that his face probably looks like it's on fire.

"Nothing. Just..." The light's caught her hair, turning the blonde locks golden and making her sun kissed skin glow - how its still sun kissed will always be a mystery, especially since it's winter. Her cheeks are still flushed red with anger at her brother and embarrassment from her clumsiness, her emerald eyes shine with residual frustrated-humor. Even wearing that dress, though, he's never needed an excuse to look at her. Well, he'd make them when he was younger. But now...

*Well, he's only a man. And that's his Roni. So sue him if he wants to look.*

"Just what?" She asks again, smiling at him all soft.

Steve grins at her. "You're gorgeous, you know that?"

He has the pleasure of watching her face light on fire. She stammers then rolls her eyes, practically running away from him. He laughs under his breath and trails after her, shaking his head. Claudia's back is to them when they enter, but Dustin's eyes are flicking between the two older teens. Steve gulps a little when the kid focuses a little too hard on his sister's obvious flush. He wiggles his eyebrows at Steve when Roni isn't paying attention and Steve rolls his eyes, ruffling the brown curls as Dustin walks past him. The younger male slaps his hand away, but sends him a warm smile nonetheless. As Claudia bustles around Roni nudges her head towards the back door. Steve

may not be the sharpest dude, but he's always understood people. That's his thing, he's... people smart? He knows how to read 'em, especially this one.

She tells her mom they're stepping outside for some air and he follows Roni out. The Ice Queen shivers when they're no longer surrounded by the warm air in her house, and he tugs her to him with no hesitation.

"Thought the Ice Queen didn't get cold?" Steve asks, cheekily.

He feels her smile against his chest. "And I thought you hated me."

"Oh, I do."

"My mistake, then." There's a pause before she speaks again. "Do you have a cigarette? Left mine in my room."

"Nope. I quit, like, months ago. Did you seriously forget the withdrawals?"

"Now that I think about it, no. Shit, I'll run in real quick, grab us a blanket too -"

"Whoa, no. Uh-uh."

"Why not?" She asks, blinking up at him.

Steve frowns. "You've been smoking like Hopper this year. Maybe you should... cut back?"

"Okay, I haven't been smoking that much -"

"Liar." He holds his ground, even when her signature glare makes him freeze in terror. "C'mon. If not for you, then do it for Dustin. I know last year at my... I know last year I encouraged you to have one, but... quit it for the kid."

"I only smoke once a day now!"

"Yeah, not good enough. Tell you what, once you finish the pack I'll help you quit."

Roni smirks up at him. "I'll just buy more."

Steve narrows his eyes. "Then I'll pay your sellers off. All of them. I have the money to." Sensing Roni's about to say something less polite and more snarky, he finds himself smirking and slipping into the charming tone that helped earn him his reputation. "Also, no one wants to kiss an ashtray."

Roni stammers a bit, then pouts, clearly having one more trick up her sleeve. "Billy did." She grumbles, and Steve feels the words stab at his heart. He doesn't flip out though, because there's regret in her eyes the minute she says it. "Sorry, I'm sorry."

"It's okay if you still have -"

"I don't. Not anymore. I started not to the second he knocked your ass on the ground, all bloody and messed up. Any romantic feelings left the building when my brother told me Billy tried to kill him." She says, but it's not with a reassuring tone. It's final, the truth. "It felt good, though, being encouraged to just be *angry*. It wasn't -"

"Good for you, though." Steve finishes, holding her even closer. "Not in the long run. I'm sorry that he ended up being the dick I thought he was."

"I know you are." Roni whispers, and he can hear the smile in her voice. "It's fine though, Steve. Honest. I'm good. I'm actually feeling so much better. Like I can finally move on."

Smiling to himself, proud of the girl in his arms, Steve leans down and kisses the top of her head. Even as the cold wind blows around them, and both teens shiver, *and pumpkin pie is ready to be eaten*, there's nowhere else that Steve would rather be.

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*Veronica's POV...*

"And then, get this. Drew, that shithead from the basketball team, came in!" I growl, sucking in a big gulp of strawberry milkshake, venting about the horror story that was Black Friday at Hunting & Camping. Not because it was busy, but because it was slow and a

freaking double shift.

"That dick? What'd he do?" Nancy asks, taking a break from her milkshake - chocolate, this time, since that's the flavor she actually likes. Jonathan steals some of her fries, earning him the legendary "Nancy Wheeler Glare of Doom".

"Ugh. He walked around for like 45 minutes and then proceeded to ask me stupid questions about camping supplies." I slurp some more milkshake before waving a fry around. "And then he had the nerve to say, 'I love me a working girl. But if you were me, you wouldn't have to work again. Well, maybe a little.' Like that was gonna make me swoon or some shit!"

"Here's your onion rings, birthday girl." Shelly interrupts us, the older woman setting down my small plate and worriedly checking me over. "Some punk was bothering you?"

"Don't worry Shelly, I handled it." I flash her a winning smile and she just hums, side-eyeing me as she moves on. I turn my body and refocus on my amused friends. *"I did not handle it."* I hiss at them.

"What? Why not?" Jonathan asks.

"I didn't get the chance. Because goddamn Billy Hargrove came from around the corner - out of nowhere - and said to 'back off.'"

"Seriously?" Nancy asks, leaning forward.

I nod, mind back on yesterday.

*As soon as those words left Drew's mouth, I felt two urges; close myself off, or throw a punch. I didn't have time to give into anything, because an angry Billy emerged from behind the winter shelves and advanced on Drew. "Hey, buddy. Back off." Drew's the tallest guy at school, but he isn't built like my ex. So when Billy says to "back off" he held up his hands.*

*"Just making small talk. Sorry man."*

*"No. You back off, or you'll regret it. Understand?"*

*I looked down, my hands clenched into fists while my nails start to bite*

*into my palms. "Yeah. Whatever, man." I didn't have to look up to know Drew stormed out. He knocked over a whole shelf of sleeping bags, snorting as he left.*

*"It's a day early, but happy birthday." I glanced up as Billy followed after Drew, leaving me behind in confusion and frustration.*

"He wished me a happy birthday, before he left. Hell, I don't even know why he was there." I tell Nancy and Jonathan, no longer in my head. "Especially after he said he'd leave me alone."

"Weird. Definitely weird."

"Guys make no sense." Jonathan makes a wounded sound. "No offense."

"Yeah, well, I can say the same about girls... but I won't." He gulps as Nancy and I glare at him in sync, thoughts two girls wink in agreement at his words.

"I think it's fair to say no one makes sense." Nancy reasons, and we all nod.

"When's Steve meeting you with us?" Jonathan asks, after we take a quick break from talking to eat in comfortable silence.

"I don't know." Nance shrugs, then looks at me.

I sigh sadly and tuck a loose curl behind my ear. "He promised to be at mine by 7:30."

"You think he's okay?"

"Let's see; his parents are home for the first time in weeks, and his dad's probably tearing into him about everything. I'm sure he's fine." I frown. "Sorry. I'm just..."

"Worried." Nancy finishes for me. I bite my lip and take a last sip of my milkshake. "Has he at least worked on his essay?"

"I'm helping him Monday. Got Mark to give me the day off since I had the hell shift yesterday." Shrugging, I chew on my onion ring. "He's

got until January to turn everything in. We're going to try and get it in by December 10th." I say as we swallow.

"We'll help, too." Jonathan offers. "Where's he applying?"

"Everywhere his dad is making him." Nancy declares angrily, furiously chewing on a fry.

Dartmouth. Indiana State. Chicago. Duke. All reach schools for Steve, unfortunately, thanks to his lackluster grades. Which he's owned up to. But hopefully if he turns in an amazing essay, they'll see how much potential he has. Steve has a lot of potential. He just needs encouragement, and that won't be happening with his dad yelling at him or his parents neglecting him.

"Let's make a pact." I declare, clearing my throat. "No matter what happens with Steve and his college applications, we'll be there for him. We'll be the support system he needs."

"Obviously." Jonathan rolls his eyes. I almost laugh at how their relationship changed - they're not best friends, but they're getting there. "I mean, he's an idiot, but he's our idiot."

Nancy laughs and nods. "Yeah." She smiles at me and takes my hand. "I'm in. I owe him that much." Nancy admits, and Jonathan gives her a soft look of understanding. "And maybe you two will finally get your shit together."

I blink at her, mouth open like a fish. "I - *what?*"

She crosses her arms and leans back, Jonathan laughing behind his free hand as his other arm wraps around her shoulders. "You heard me. Jonathan and I talked about it. We're tired of you two. Get your *shit* together." Nancy orders.

I sigh, the breath that escapes me making me sag. Crumpled into myself a bit, I look up at my two closest friends from my lashes and finally voice my fear. "What if we get together, but realize we waited too long and we're just building up a fantasy?"

Nancy raises her eyebrows. "Okay, I seriously doubt that could even be a *possibility* for you two, alright?"



"But -"

She shakes her head, stopping me. "And even if that *did* happen, wouldn't it be better if you could say 'at least we tried?' Come on, Jonathan, help me out here."

Her boyfriend looks between the two of us, lost. I fold my arms and make a gesture for him to speak up, and he groans. "I, well, uh... I mean, Nancy's right?"

"Thank you, Jonathan."

"Real helpful Johnny, thanks." Nancy and I both respond, though I'm significantly less smiley.

Jonathan pouts and crumples up a napkin. "Oh, shut up!" He chucks the napkin at my head and I cross my eyes, watching it fall onto my lap. "Think about it though, Ver. You guys are *gross*."

I narrow my eyes. "That's rich, coming from googly eyes one and two." I point at them accusingly.

Nancy pouts. "Hey!"

"Alright, alright. It's true though. Not what you said about us!" Jonathan clarifies, and I raise an eyebrow. "Even before... everything... I'd catch him staring at you when you weren't looking, and you'd do the same. It pissed me off because I knew you liked him but I didn't realize he felt the same. I know better now, and so do you. Plus, you and Steve have the real shit - *shared trauma*."

I tilt my head in thought and furrow my eyebrows. "Wait a minute, isn't that the same thing Murray Bauman told you and Nance?" I ask, remembering what he told me about their pleasurable road trip.

Jonathan laughs and looks lovingly at his girlfriend. "What can I say? It was a good point."

I watch them stare longing at each other, like the whole world just disappeared and it's only them. It's so gross. "God, you two are *disgusting*." I complain.

Nancy smirks at me, all smug and confident and proud. "Yeah, well, this could be you and Steve *but* you're both being *idiots*."

"Jonathan, your girlfriend's bullying me!"

Nancy wrinkles her nose at me. "Jonathan, your sister's being stupid."

Said boy groans and rubs his forehead, eyes now on his empty mug. "Jonathan doesn't care. Jonathan needs more coffee if he's going to have to deal with your dramatics."

I grin mischievously. "Jonathan needs to stop speaking in the third person."

Nancy nods and copies my smile. "Jonathan should be cut off from coffee, he barely sleep as it is."

"You would now." He sasses, not missing a beat. Nancy turns redder than a strawberry, blue eyes going dark with rage.

"Jonathan!" She yells, shoving him in the shoulder. He groans in pain and rubs it, glaring at her.

I snort and finish my last onion ring, signaling Shelly for another milkshake. She nods and winks my way. "God, I love you two."

They both soften when I focus on them. Nancy smiles. "We love you, too."

"Yeah."

I roll my eyes good-naturedly. "Whatever."

Jonathan peers out the window, a weird mix of a smile and worried expression gracing his face. "Guess his parents finally let him go."

"What?" I blink and turn in my seat, watching a forlorn Steve walk towards the entrance to Sally's, hands tucked in his coat pockets as he glares at the ground. The bell jingles, signaling the door opening, and the three of us watch him make his way to our booth. When our eyes meet he sends me a sad smile, tugging off his coat and folding it in his arm.

"Hey, my parents had to leave a little earlier. Business emergency or something. I miss anything exciting?" He asks, leaning over and behind me to leave his coat on the thick sill next to me, on top of my own. He sits down and pulls me into him. I go willingly, needing his touch, too. "Happy birthday, Roni." He whispers in my ear, kissing my forehead lightly. I feel him shudder and squeeze and arm around his stomach.

"You good, man?" Jonathan asks and we pull away from each other without letting go of one another.

Steve sighs and shrugs. "Fine."

"Steve -"

He shakes his head at Nancy, frowning now. "Nance, it's okay. I'll tell you guys about it tomorrow. Today's all about Roni."

I watch him carefully, wanting to give in to my curiosity, but I know Steve. He needs time to wrap his head around whatever his dad just threw at him. Hounding him for the story when he isn't ready to talk about it... that isn't going to help him. "Well, I'm happy you're here, baby." I smile up at him, not a word of a lie escaping my lips.

He releases the last of the tension in his bones and gives me a thankful look. "You order another milkshake?"

"Hell yeah. Don't worry, it's only my second." I reassure him, the two of us remembering a time this past July when I'd had four milkshakes and was left with a sugar rush that lasted nine hours.

He snorts. "It's your birthday. I'd be more concerned if you *didn't* order more than one."

"You two know we're still here, right?" Nancy teases us and we jump, both giving her twin innocent expressions. "Good. So, Steve, you going to suck it up for our birthday girl and order a strawberry milkshake?"

"Did you?" He asks, the two exes glaring friendly at each other, any lingering awkwardness from the last few weeks long-gone.

"No. She had a chocolate one."

"Yeah, and he had coffee." Nancy tattles on her boyfriend in return, who rolls his eyes.

While the new couple bickers like an old married couple, I look up at Steve. "Well, you going to give in to my wishes and have a strawberry shake with me?" He pouts and I laugh at the disgusted look on his face. "I'm kidding. Get your chocolate one. I'll probably steal some."

"Listen, that isn't fair. You know I won't take from yours!" Steve gripes, and I widen my green eyes dramatically, lip wobbling. "I mean, of course you can."

"Guys. So easily manipulated." Nancy mutters conspiratorially to me, and I wink at her. The boys next to us grumble in disagreement.

"Here you go, sweetheart. Hi Steve, chocolate milkshake?" Shelly asks, setting my strawberry milkshake down in front of me and taking away the empty glass.

He nods. "Yes, please. And a big plate of curly fries."

"You got it, sweetie. I'll be back soon. More coffee, Jonathan?" Shelly offers, and my oldest friend grins.

"No thanks. I've been told I'm overdoing it." He pokes his tongue out at Nancy and I while Shelly laughs.

"Okay. I'll be back in a jiff."

"Seriously guys, what did I miss?" Steve asks, and I point at the couple across from us.

"They were torturing me, Steve."

"She's just being dramatic." Jonathan defends himself, and my mouth opens in disbelief.

"They were *gross*."

"Yeah, but at least we didn't shove an entire slice of cherry pie down

*our* throats!"

"It's my birthday, Jonathan, I got excited -"

"You didn't even chew -"

"Always been more of a -"

"Swallower. I never wanted to know that -"

"Yeah, well, you also made me sit in the cold for hours for ten straight hours so you could take photos of the same tree!"

"It was for a project! You love the woods!"

"Not when the snow reaches my hips and I'm practically an ice cube!"

"I thought you're the Ice Queen!"

"It's not a literal nickname, Johnny!"

"Jesus, I'm sorry I asked." Steve interrupts us, and he looks to Nancy for help but she's busy trying not to choke on her laughter, her face turning bright red. "Have they been like that all day?"

"All their lives, probably." Nancy manages to get out, smirking.

Jonathan and I look over at each other and make the same face. That's fair.

Feeling a little mischievous, I scoot over and stare up at the guy I love, his hazel eyes on me in less than a second. "Why? Is it a bad thing?" I ask Steve, batting my lashes so I look worried at his answer.

"Wha-no! No, of course not. It's awesome. I mean, it's a little weird, but... oh, you devious little shit." Steve points at me, cutting off his awkward rambling. I start to smile. "Stop, no, you suck. Screw you, you blonde gremlin. You've been teasing me like that for two whole weeks, I thought I'd get a break on your birthday." My smile gets wider and I laugh, chest the lightest it's been in five damn years, since my dad left and everything I thought I knew about my then-hero was a lie.

Shelly returns with the plate of fries and a chocolate shake, giggling at the four of us. As Steve accepts his milkshake while continuing to complain about my teasing Jonathan and Nancy laugh at him. I wink at Jonathan as he presses a kiss to Nancy's temple, then take a sip from my strawberry milkshake. Still complaining about the constant teasing to his ex-girlfriend/now good friend, Steve tugs me into his side. His right hand finds mine and his fingers trace over the arrow ring on my thumb.

I haven't enjoyed my birthday, not in five years. Not really. I celebrate it for my family and friends, not necessarily for me. Not even last year, when I made it out of Hell alive. Today, though... today's different. I'm going to enjoy today *for me*.

---

"Happy Birthday to you! Happy Birthday to you! Happy Birthday," I cringe but laugh at the out-of-key singing, a collection of bad, good, and absolutely terrifying voices screaming in my ears, "to Veronica! Happy Birthday to you!" I snort as the gathering cheers, Hopper and my mom shouting at me to blow out my candles while Max, Lucas, and Dustin remind me to make a wish. El is sitting next to me on the couch, Hop telling mom she's his foster kid - but to *keep it under wraps, Claudia, it's new and I don't want people bothering me just yet, but Veronica's been helping me with her*. So, not really a lie, but not the whole truth. It's need to know, anyway, and that's all mom needed to know before she ushered the tiny girl into the house and swept her up in the storm that is Claudia Henderson's mothering.

El blinks up at me in confusion, her eyes flicking to the candles. "Make... a wish? Why?" She whispers before I can lean in.

I pause and shrug. "I don't know why, really. It's just something you do, on your birthday. You blow out the candles, make a wish, and hope it comes true."

"Does it?"

I smile at her, thinking about last year's wish. *I wish El was alive*. "Sometimes."

"Seriously, blow out the candles, your cake's gonna be ruined!" Mike

warns, and I roll my eyes. To my absolute pleasure El copies me.

I lean towards the tiny flames and think. And nothing comes to mind. I don't have anything to wish for, because everything I want is here, and what I can't have will always be gone. So I just blow out the candles. The kids cheer in relief as my mom picks the cake back up, her and Joyce retreating to the kitchen to start serving it.

"Hey, buddy. How are you feeling?" I ask Will as he comes over to join El and I on the couch.

He's started looking more lively, this past week. I mean, he's still pale and skinny, but he's cheeks are constantly flushed red with happiness and his eyes aren't so dark with fear. Not that he's all better. Neither one of us will be, probably not for a while. We've called each other enough times after a nightmare this past month to think that.

Will grins and nods, and I throw an arm around both kids. "Good. Just got tired of listening to Dustin and Lucas argue with Mike about an old campaign."

I snort and watch the three boys bicker, Max shaking her head and snapping her fingers in their faces to cool them off while Hopper looks down at his beer like he's hoping it'll multiply. Steve's joined in the little battle of wits while Jonathan snaps some pics and Nancy takes a seat next to El, who lets her in the space.

"God, what a bunch of *idiots*." Nancy gripes.

"Yeah. *Idiots*." El copies. Nance and I look at each other in amusement.

"Come on guys, let's beat the morons for the biggest slices of cake." I suggest, standing up.

"Hell yeah. Last year I had to fight Dustin for my piece." Will bitterly mumbles and I grin at the sweet boy's malice.

"Don't worry, I'll protect you." A tiny noise comes from my other side as we stand. "And El. El and I will protect you." The quiet girl peers around me to nod supportively at Will, who smiles thankfully at her.

"Cake's ready!" My mom yells, just as we're entering the kitchen. There's a mad dash behind us, but I calmly accept one of the largest pieces, kissing my mom on the cheek and hugging Joyce, who fondly pats my back despite the pain still in her eyes.

A woman as wonderful as her doesn't deserve to be sad.

"This is cake." El mutters up to me, a question without being phrased as one. I nod and sit back down on the couch, a little breathless after having to dodge Lucas and Dustin trying to swipe at my slice.

"Yes. Chocolate with layers of strawberry jelly."

"Like on the sandwiches Hop makes."

I nod, and grin. "I know it isn't an Eggo, but I promise it's still good."

She sends me a shy smile and I eagerly watch her take a bite. She grins in awe and proceeds to stuff half of her slice and her mouth, cheeks puffing out like a chipmunk's.

"Whoa there, relax. Careful bites, sweetheart." I gently warn. She nods and chews for a solid minute, swallowing in satisfaction. "I think Mike misses you." I whisper conspiratorially, winking. She blushes and takes another bite, before worriedly looking at the other girl in the Party. "Max doesn't like him. She's nice, El." El looks at me, brow eyes hard, and I raise an eyebrow in motherly judgment. El blushes some more and glances down at her lap. I tap under her chin and she lifts it. "Go talk to your friends. If they get irritating, let me know."

"Okay. Thank you, Veronica." El gets up and walks over to the group of kids sitting around the dining table. I watch as she awkwardly sits next to Max, the redhead giving her a look of surprise before smiling warmly. El's face is deadpan, but my concern fades when I see her shoulders relax.

"Looking a little lonely there, birthday girl." Steve voices next to me, and I grin as he sits next to me.

"Well, it was your turn to handle the kids."

Steve's nose wrinkles. "Next time Nancy and Jonathan can take care



of that shit."

I laugh. "Baby, we're the babysitters. Mike doesn't listen to Nance, anyway, and he's usually half the problem."

"Nah. 65% of the problem, at least." Steve snorts, then throws me a confused look. "What?"

I remove my napkin from his cheek, smiling big. "Anyone ever tell you you're a messy eater, Steven?"

He gets this hungry look in his eyes, all flirtatious and shit. I bite my lip and snort. "Not what I meant, and you know it."

"Yeah, yeah. Think of that as payback for the diner, or any other time you've had your fun with me."

"I thought you like me happy?"

"I ain't falling for that shit again." I grin and shove against him with my shoulder. "But yes, I love seeing you happy." I close my eyes and set down my half-empty plate, curling into him. I feel him lean forward to do the same. He moves us so my back is against his chest, and his left leg is bent against the back of the couch. I open my eyes as his arms wrap around me, smiling when Jonathan walks up to the couch and gestures for me to move my legs. I lift them the bare minimum and he snorts, placing my feet across his lap while Nancy sits on the arm of the couch, holding onto his shoulders.

"That's some gross shit, Leia." Dustin voices, and I give him a very unconvincing glare.

"Dusty - oh, how sweet, don't move!" My mom orders, dashing over to the mantle above the fireplace to grab her polaroid. I wince at the flash, my mom taking at least six pictures of us before she sets the photos down to develop, my brother making teasing faces at us the whole time.

"Is it present time yet?" He asks impatiently, my mom rolling her eyes.

"I think that's up to your sister." Mom tells him. I glance at the kids

quickly, all of whom are buzzing with excitement. I make a gesture like a real queen would and Dustin *whoops*.

"Sweet! I go first!" He declares, dashing off to his room, followed by the rest of the kids. They probably all stored them in there, not that it really mattered. Jonathan, Nancy, Steve and I came here later than we thought we would, and I haven't even had a chance to get past the kitchen.

The adults move around, Hopper and Joyce moving any fragile items away from the couch before the hoard of children returns. Steve snorts at their excitement before getting up himself. "Where are you guys going?" I ask as Nancy and Jonathan follow him, their hands entwined.

"What, you thought we didn't get you anything." He winks and walks away, Hopper clearing his throat when the Chief sees my face.

"What?!" I ask, my mom and Joyce back in the kitchen to throw out the chocolate-and-strawberry stained paper plates.

"Nothing, hooligan. It's just good to see you smiling. Don't think I'm giving Harrington a free pass. We'll have a nice chat tonight."

I narrow my eyes. "Oh my God Hop, we aren't dating."

"No, but I ain't stupid. Let me have this."

"As practice for when Mike and El start dating."

Hopper pales, then points at me very Harrison Ford like. "Nope. Uh-uh. You take that back." I bite my lip in amusement. "God, have you always been like this?"

"You're the one who's been calling me 'hooligan'. What do you think?"

He glares, then his lips twitch into a rare, genuine grin. Even his eyes light up. "As long as you keep the lawbreaking to a minimum, I'm alright with it."

"What are you thinking. Two law minimum? Three?"

He snorts, but before he can respond the kids return, Dustin sitting where Jonathan previously was as the others gather around the couch and the coffee table, clutching presents of different sizes. Steve comes in, carrying a decent size box. He sits next to me while Jonathan argues with Dustin about the new seating arrangement before shoving my little brother into my side and awkwardly slipping into the small space before the couch arm and the cushion. Nancy gives both guys an unimpressed look before sitting on the floor, back against the coffee table. Her left foot entangles comfortably with my right.

"Okay! Me first! Because I'm actually related to her!" Dustin announces, the others grumbling. Mike full-on pouts, but blushes when El sends him a shy smile.

Gross.

"Okay, okay."

"For you, milady." Dustin presents the gift to me with his head bowed. I roll my eyes but ruffle his curls, tearing the wrapping paper off and removing the tape from the brown box. I gasp in happiness and pull out something I'd been eyeing since it came out.

"The WM-DD2? No way." I flip the new walkman around in my hands. I look up at him, eyebrows raised. "Okay, you spent all your money at the arcade. How'd you even afford this?"

"Mom, duh, stupid." I make to punch him and he flinches, glaring up at me when I smile teasingly and play with his curls again.

"You suck."

"I know." I set the walkman in my lap and open my arms, laughing when he crashes into me and nearly topples us both into an unprepared Steve.

"Okay, my turn."

"Jonathan, dude, relax." Dustin gripes, moving back into the cushions.

Jonathan throws him an incredulous look. "You little hypocrite."

"Oh, I'm sorry I was excited to give *my sister* her gift!"

"I'm her brother, too!"

"I'm so sorry, I guess I missed the memo where *my mom gave birth to you!*"

"You guys do this every year, just hand me your present Johnny." I order in amusement, laughing when my older brother hands over his gift and sends one last glare at my unrelentingly stubborn little brother.

It's a large letter, with the words "OPEN CAREFULLY VER" scratched on top. I snort and carefully open the envelope, screaming and jumping off the couch to attack an already smushed Jonathan, the letter and its contents on the floor.

"HOLY SHIT YOU'RE AMAZING!" I scream in his ear, my best friend laughing and groaning in pain. "Seriously, how did you, I mean, holy shit!"

"I'm glad you like it."

"I fucking *love* it."

"Language, Veronica!" My mom admonishes.

"He got us tickets to see Bruce Springsteen! I'm going to curse, ma!" I yell back without turning around, Jonathan still hugging me. "I love you, man. Seriously."

"You don't have to bring me. You can -"

"Nope. Me and you. Besides, Steve only listens to Wham! and Toto." I whisper, and he snorts.

"That's true." I finally get off him and awkwardly fall back onto my original spot, nearly crushing Dustin, too. Nancy is giggling, holding up the envelope as she carefully slips the two tickets back in.

"He got these like, months ago. Steve and I were there for emotional support. You should've heard him on the phone, he was an angry mess."

"She's lying. I was very polite." Jonathan assures Joyce, who rolls her eyes with a small smile. Nancy's boyfriend pokes his tongue out at her and she does the same, screwing up her face like she just ate a lemon.

"Seriously, this is amazing. *Born in the U.S.A.* is seriously the best album ever."

"I know!"

"You're fucking amazing. *Don't* say that word." I point at El, whose brows furrow in confusion.

"Here, me next!" Lucas cheers, smacking Mike out of the way. He hands me two presents. "The smaller one's from Erica. She said to say 'sorry I can't be there, but I'm a Queen, too. I've got responsibilities. You get it.'" I snicker at his very spot-on impression of the 10-year-old sass machine, no doubt ruling the sleepover she was invited to.

I open hers first, laughing when I find it's one of her newer brushes and some clips and ties. She's been teaching me how to do her hair for the past few months - well, what she knows how to do. Guess this is her way of saying I've got the hang of it.

*No. It's just her way of saying I've got more to learn.*

I set them aside and tell Lucas to give his sister a hug from me, biting my lip to stop the laugh from escaping me when he gags and complains.

"Really mature, Lucas." Max tells him with an unimpressed glare. Lucas shuts up and blushes.

"Whatever. Open mine, now. It's *actually* for you."

I smile and unwrap the present, smiling when I pull out a new cardigan. It's warm, thick, and hunter green with an arrow pattern. "Thanks, Lucas." I grin and slip it on over my black long-sleeved shirt,

instantly cozy.

"Mom took me shopping and I saw it. Thought you'd like it." He shrugs, blushing a little as he speaks with an indifferent tone.

"Well, I love it. Thanks. I feel very 'Robin Hood' in it. Or Green Arrow."

Mike pushes past him to impatiently give me a bag, glaring frustratedly at the guys who already handed me a gift. "Enjoy, mom." He teases, and I tap his nose.

"Thank you, honey. You're too kind." Mike growls a little and Nancy laughs, kicking him in the shin when he goes to kick her in the side.

The birthday bag is filled with all kinds of candy, as well as a couple of whoopee cushions, shocking gum, and a joy buzzer. "Because you can't bring your bow and arrows to school." He explains, shrugging.

"Thanks, Mikey. Hey, where are the Milk Duds?" I ask, shaking the bag. He snorts and walks away, sitting next to El.

"Hey, me next." Max excitedly walks towards me, her knees brushing the carpet as she goes. She stops next to Nancy and holds up the box, bashfully pushing her red hair behind her ears as her freckled face grows hot. "I know we haven't known each other very long, but you've been really nice to me. Thank you."

"Well, you're pretty awesome, Mad Max." I tell her, accepting the gift and sending her a soft smile. I open the large box to pull out a white skateboard helmet, brand new and everything. There are some pads, too, and a pair of fingerless gloves.

"I know you said you don't skateboard, but I want to teach you. If that's okay. This is also from my mom, too, because she wanted to thank you for watching me these past few weeks. You can just -"

I set the box on Steve's lap and kneel on the floor, tugging the redhead to me. "Thank you. I'd love for you to teach me."

"Happy birthday." She whispers, the usually loud girl bashful. I squeeze her, then release her from my grasp.

"We'll go next week, if it isn't too cold out."

"It may be a little longer. My, uh, board's still busted."

Billy. That fucking dick.

"Hey, I'm patient. Thank you, even though I'm going to look ridiculous all padded-out like some kid."

"Can't have you damaging yourself, Veronica." She says, suddenly all serious. I smile at her protectiveness, and she seems to have won my mom's complete affection because Claudia Henderson is complimenting her for giving me a thoughtful, *safe* gift.

"Go on, Jane. Give Veronica our gift." Hopper nudges El, who nods in complete focus and walks over to me, wordlessly passing over a large tube. I unravel the paper and twist off the top, smiling when I pull out the arrows - some for training, others for hunting.

"Thanks, sweetheart." I give her a warm hug, hand brushing through her short curls soothingly. She holds onto me just as tight, and I realize how much things have changed since I first found this amazing kid in the rain.

We let go of each other and she returns to Hopper, high-fiving him and smiling when he ruffles her hair.

Joyce goes next, walking over to me with a smile. "Thank you for everything, dear. You've been so good to Will, and such a great friend to Jonathan. Thanks for loving my boys."

"I love you too, mama J." I tell her sincerely, gently taking the box. Inside is a slightly worn watch with brown leather straps. "Thank you."

"My mom gave it to me, when I turned 17. I promised I'd pass it down -"

"Joyce, I can't accept this."

"Shh, let me finish, dear." I nod and she cups my cheeks. "I promised my mom I would pass it down to my daughter. I am."

I tear up and snuffle, but maintain eye contact. "Joyce." My lips wobble, and hers do too. With a little breath she wraps me in that hug of hers, hands stroking my back. "I love it. Thank you, mama J."

"Of course, dear. Now, you promise me it'll go to your daughter when she's this age. Any kind of daughter you may have, blood or not."

"I promise." She steps back a little to place it on my left wrist, and it's a good kind of weight. "There. Perfect."

"Thank you." I whisper again, fingers carefully rubbing around the slightly dented silver casing.

She smiles and my mom pulls her into a hug. It's strange. Sometimes it slips my mind that they used to be close friends. I mean, they've lived in Hawkins their whole lives. They grew up together. Their ex-husbands are best pals - *were best pals?* - and now their kids are best friends. Before they both had to bust their asses twice as hard at work, Joyce and my mom would have weekly wine nights. Hopefully they'll restart that tradition. I think they've missed each other, even though all that kept them apart was their jobs.

My mom already gave me her gift this morning - brand new makeup and a cute pair of black thigh high boots - so next up is Will. Inside his box is a framed picture. It's a detailed drawing of a girl in the woods, back to the viewer with her head tilted down and to the side. A bow is clutched in her right hand, and an arrow in the other. She's surrounded by trees in the fall, her blonde hair practically gold in the lighting he created. The girl's wearing a quiver across her back, there's a robin hood hat on her hand, and she's dressed just how Robin Hood would've, only more battle-hardened with small pieces of silver armor and tears in her clothes, certain spots filled in lightly with red. She's a total badass.

"I found a picture of you standing like that in Jonathan's portfolio. I wanted you to have a copy, too. Just a little more... medieval, I guess." I smile and set it down on my lap, the skinny boy staring down at his feet before looking me in the eye. "I know you love Robin Hood, and I know people compare you to him. They aren't wrong, but... to me, you're more of a hero than he could ever be written to be. That's how I see you."



I smile and stand up to hug him, one hand clutched onto the framed portrait. "This was your best drawing yet, Will. Seriously. This is how you see me?"

"Yeah. Always."

I grin and kiss his temple. "If I could draw, you'd be the bravest wizard to ever appear on a piece of paper." He nods at my words and we part with a soft smile. He sits down on the floor in front of his older brother, who gives him a proud smile.

"Alright, I've waited long enough. Open it." Nancy claps, passing me her gift. I lift the lid and grin when I see a white jacket with red and blue stripes along its wrist, collar, and bottom. It's an Olympics jacket, from this past summer's games. Where the "USA" used to be, someone painstakingly sewed in a "HENDERSON" patch. "My mom showed me how to stitch it, but I promise this was all me. You like it?" She asks, bouncing excitedly on the ground.

I nod and smile, thinking about Barb's letter to me last year. I still pull it out and read it when I need to remember her voice. *"And, hey, archery is an Olympic sport, so when you think you're ready you should totally aim to get in."*

"I love it, Nance, honest."

She clasps her hands together and grins. "Good! You need a cool jacket to wear when you're showing off at the range."

I smile and lean forward so we're wrapped in an awkward, yet strangely comfortable hug. "Man, you guys are going to have to beat this next year. I'll give you a break for Christmas, don't want your fire to burn out." I joke, the kids making offended noises as they take the bait. El smirks at me like she can read my thoughts and hey, she probably can. I wouldn't be surprised.

"Hang on a second, whoa. What about me?" Steve asks, pouting. "I've been patient. I didn't fight anyone to go first. I've just sat here, let you throw your presents on me, and I get nothing in return."

"Technically you wouldn't be getting anything. You'd be giving me a

gift."

He points at me. "Ha, well, joke's on you since I haven't even given it to you yet."

"You're right, I'm sorry." He narrows his eyes like he doesn't believe me and I kiss his cheek. "I didn't forget about you." I promise, whispering it in his ear. He nods and bites his bottom lip, then wordlessly hands me a little box, professionally wrapped. I carefully undo the little bow and peel back the green fabric. The box inside is simple, and I frown when I open it to find some baseball cards. "Oh. Uh. Thanks."

Jonathan rushes in front of me, his camera going off with a click as I hold up the cards uselessly, still frowning. Steve starts laughing, Nancy and the others joining him. "I'm sorry! I had to-I had to see your fa-face!" He manages to get out. "You're real gifts in your room. You'll see it later."

"On that note, we should clear this mess up. Anyone up for some Monopoly?" My mom asks, getting into action. The kids all agree but tell Lucas he's sitting it out and just playing banker, because the kids gets way too competitive. They rush off to grab a few more games, leaving the rest of us to clean the living room. When the others disappear into the kitchen to throw out the wrapping paper I gather up my presents, setting them down neatly. I put the gag gift on top, snorting.

*Okay. It was pretty funny.*

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Leaning against the open door, I wave as Jonathan and Steve drive off, Nancy in her boyfriend's car. The happy couple's probably off to go neck at Lovers' Lake while Steve goes home to face his parents again. They don't leave for another week, then they're gone for a month. They're missing Christmas this year - Steve had explained that because he's an adult, they didn't think the holiday would be as important to him.

Those assholes. Seriously. If I ever get to meet them, they'll both get a piece of my mind. Or an arrow in the knee.

I'm kidding. Kind of. Not at all.

Max had been the first to go, and I'd watched her jog down the driveway to the blue Camaro. I waves after her, then sent a tentative one to Billy. Either he was ignoring me or he just didn't see, but my ex drove off with his sister.

Joyce had been next, having an early day tomorrow at Melvald's. She took the boys with her, the four of them yapping about their new campaign. Hopefully they'll keep it down, or at least be too tired to start tonight and just pass out in Will's room. I smiled when the moms agreed to see each other next Saturday night, red wine and awful romance books promised.

Hopper followed after her, El and I hugging goodbye while the Chief pulled Steve aside and out of view. When they returned Steve was shaking like a leaf, but Hop looked indifferent. He simply hugged my mom goodbye, gave me a fatherly noogie and got into his car, promising El Eggos for breakfast.

I gave Steve a worried look but he managed a faint smile, still paler than usual. His moles stuck out more because of it, and I wish I could have leaned up and kissed each and every one.

With a longing sigh I step back into the house, closing the door behind me and locking up. "Was it a good night, dumpling?" My mom asks, yawning tiredly and pulling me into a hug.

"Mhmm. Thank you. Does anything else need to be cleaned up?"

"No, we're all good. You and your friends were a big help." This time we both yawn, and she laughs. "Alright, bed time. Don't forget your presents!" She reminds me, heading towards the master. She turns to me and smiles, though, all mischievous. "You're going to love it." She warns me, very unhelpful, then disappears. I frown but shrug, checking the windows and the door again before lifting my box of gifts and shutting off the lights as I go. I pause to grab my purse, having left it on the counter when I got home from the diner.

My bedroom door is open, but the lights are off so I can't see anything. With a sigh and a flick of the switch, the box fumbles in my

hands as I'm taken completely by surprise.

In addition to the Thanksgiving gardenias by my bed, seventeen other bouquets have been carefully placed around my room. I subconsciously set the box on my desk and walk around, Steve's voice in my head as I remember him promising to fill my room with eighteen bouquets. I thought he'd been joking, though.

That's not my only present, though. I walk to the foot of my bed and glance down at another professionally wrapped gift. Under it is a sheet of paper, but I just want to make sure I haven't fallen for another little prank.

Just as carefully as before I open the present, and this time a more ornate jewelry box is revealed. It's from the same place as my ring, the fancy one on Main. Lifting the lid, my breath is taken away.

It's a simple necklace, really. It's held together by a gold chain, a pear on either side of the pendant attaching everything together. The pendant is a small gardenia, handcrafted and well detailed. I lift it in the light and fall a little more in love with Steven Theodore Harrington, because damn it he knows me better than I sometimes do.

I place it back in the box, careful not to tangle the chain, then lift the paper up, sitting next to Steve's present. I'd recognize the heavy scratch anywhere, but for once Steve actually seemed to take his time writing.

*My Roni,*

*First of all, I'm sorry about the gag gift. I couldn't help it, though, it was too good to pass up. I hope this makes up for it. And no, it wasn't expensive. Yes, I'm sure this is what I wanted to spend my money on. I mean, gardenias aren't always available. They make you happy, and I want you to be happy. I hope wearing this reminds you that things you love are always with you, no matter what.*

*So, now that you have your real gift, there's something I had to tell you. I'm just not brave enough to say it, but until I am, this letter is the best I can do. My class read this poem in English class sophomore year, and*

*after some help from the two smartest people we know, I found it again.  
E.E. Cummings can take it from here:*

*i carry your heart with me (i carry it in  
my heart) i am never without it(anywhere  
i go you go,my dear; and whatever is done  
by only me is your doing, my darling)  
i fear  
no fate (for you are my fate, my sweet) i want  
no world (for beautiful you are my world, my true)  
and it's you are whatever a moon has always meant  
and whatever a sun will always sing is you  
here is the deepest secret nobody knows  
(here is the root of the root and the bud of the bud  
and the sky of the sky of a tree called life; which grows  
higher than soul can hope or mind can hide)  
and this is the wonder that's keeping the stars apart  
i carry your heart (i carry it in my heart)*

*Princess, I don't know what's going to happen in the future. The only thing  
I'm sure of is how much you matter to me. Back then, now, down the  
road. You will always matter to me, you'll always be in my heart.*

*Happy Birthday Roni.*

*Love Steven*

*I smile and bite my lip, carefully holding the slip of paper away from  
my tear-leaking face. With a soft sigh I fold it down, then walk to my*

purse to pull out my wallet. I slid it into the slot behind my ID, then close the black leather and press it to my lips.

I can be patient. And if necessary, I will be brave. Because when it comes to Steve, I carry his heart too.

*I carry it in my heart.*

## 21. So Be Brave

**OH MY GOD! OKAY, IT'S HAPPENING! EVERYBODY STAY CALM! (What's the procedure, everyone? What's the procedure?) STAY F\*CKING CALM!**

Sorry, I had to. If a quote from *The Office* fits in the moment, I'm going to use it. Okay, y'all already know the main event of this chapter.

I know I said this chapter would only be happy, but I pulled a "GoT's D&D" and "forgot about Barbara's funeral". It's pretty brief, and more bittersweet, but it finally happened. The rest is all smiles, I promise!

There're some cute El and Veronica moments here, because I really love the relationship they have, and there's some similarity in their anger and growth, and generally feeling lost. I also have an important moment between Hopper and Veronica, to really emphasize how important they are to each other and I haven't had a more pure moment between them - their last major scene was a few chapters ago, and she was still mad at him.

But the main event? **THEY'RE** finally getting their shit together. It's gonna be dramatic. It's gonna be cute. It could be Naley-worthy. It's also sweet, and you get Steve's perspective too. I also decided to do Christmas and New Years in the next chapter, which I'm writing now and hopefully will post sometime this weekend (hopefully Sunday if it all works out). **AND IF YOU'RE CONCERNED** about their relationship, know that I'm not making it perfect, and in that same vein I'm not going to have them fight for no reason, or do it OOC. Also, remember that I'm working to make Billy learn to be an actual human with a heart - he'll still be an asshole, but he won't be 100% a dick. And no, he and Veronica **WILL NOT** be getting back together. They ain't endgame. But in the same way Nancy (and in this fic Veronica and Jonathan) helped make Steve a better person, I think Veronica and Max could do the same. Plus, how did Max go from completely hating Billy to all of Season 3 defending him? Let's

expand on that, people.

**BUT** for now, enjoy Honeymoon-phase Steronica. *Did we decide on Steronica?* I'm really liking that since the gate closed and she's had time to properly heal, Veronica's changing. It's fun writing her as a prankster and making her more bubbly and relaxed. Also, the next chapter will be very, very sappy, so get ready for some cavities because my babies earned their happiness after the shit I threw at them!

As always, I only own Veronica. I hope you enjoy this chapter!

Oh, and if you want to listen to the song they dance to (which I'm making 'their song') it's *You And I* by Eddie Rabbitt and Crystal Gayle.

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**December 9, 1984**

I've only ever been to one funeral before: Grandpa Henderson's. It was raining then, and I was surrounded by military men and trying not to flinch at the sound of the 21-gun salute. I was nine at the time, and the family only went to support my dad. I barely even knew Grandpa H. Just that he was a dick, which is why dad never let us around him. Or him around us.

Which is kind of ironic, if you think about it.

This isn't what I pictured, though, when it finally happened. When the Hollands finally got their closure. The sun is shining despite the December chill. The birds that didn't migrate are chirping on the snow-clinging branches.

And I wouldn't change a thing. Barbara wouldn't want the occasion to be more miserable than it already is.

The article Nancy and Jonathan worked on came out only a week ago, but in that week Hawkins Lab was permanently shut down and this strange, quiet town made the national news. Murray Bauman made good on his money and promise, anonymously releasing Dr. Owens tapes confession. The high ranking members of the



"Department of Energy" admitted to Barbara's death and cover up, Bauman reporting to the Hollands that she was accidentally exposed to an experimental asphyxiant and was unable to recover. The news article, co-written by Bauman and Nancy, reported that, "These high-ranking officials also admitted to the abduction of Ms. Holland and an unnamed friend, who was fortunately not exposed to the chemical leak. A settlement was reached out of court."

Everyone in Hawkins knows that survivor's me. I don't know if my name will end up getting out - probably not, if the government has anything to say about it. But since the article came out, more kids at school have started talking to me, pushing past their fear of the "Ice Queen's wrath." Robin nearly bit off Keith's head when he kept trying to ask me shit in physics.

I don't like it. The pity, the questions I can't ever answer truthfully. But I'm living with it. If that's the price I have to pay for Hawkins Lab admitting to their crimes, then I'm willing to pay it ten-times over.

Nancy sniffles next to me, wiping her tears with one hand while the priest lays our fallen friend to rest. Jonathan is on her other side, tightly gripping her hand. The Hollands stand by the funeral wreath, occasionally looking at their daughter's school photo.

Steve stands on my other side, an arm around my waist and his other hand in the pocket of his black slacks. My black lace dress swirls at my knees, brushing over my sheer black tights.

"In sure and certain hope of the resurrection to eternal life through Our Lord Jesus Christ, we commend to Almighty God Barbara, and we commit his/her body to the ground: earth to earth, ashes to ashes, dust to dust. The Lord bless her and keep her, the Lord make His Face to shine upon her and be gracious to her, the Lord lift up His countenance upon her and give her peace. *Amen.*"

"Amen." The gathering silently murmurs, and I watch Mr. Holland and Marcia gently place a white rose each on their daughter's casket, silently crying as they return to their original spot. Nancy and I go next, and I place a palm next to my flower, eyes closed in a silent prayer.

I've never been particularly religious. I'm still not, but... It feels right.

Steve places his flower down next, then Jonathan even though he knew her less than Steve did. I watch as a few other classmates do the same, kids I never really spoke to before. I should check on them. If they're here, Barb must've been important to them, too. It's easy to think you're alone in your grief.

The last of the family and friends leave their flowers and Barbara's coffin is lowered gently into its final resting place. A few church choir members sing Amazing Grace as we each gather a fistful of dirt to scatter down. When our friend's casket is six-feet under, when the grave has been covered in dirt and flowers placed on her tombstone, the rest of the gathering leaves. Steve squeezes my waist, Jonathan kisses his girlfriend's cheek, and the two guys leave to stand by their cars.

Nancy and I come forward, next to the crying Hollands. Not that we're dry-eyed ourselves.

"We'd like to thank you two, for everything. Thank you for being such a good friend to our girl, even though she's gone." Mr. Holland roughly thanks us, voice husky with tears.

"She's always going to be our friend." I promise them, hand tight around Nancy's. "I'm sorry I couldn't save her."

"Veronica, you will *never* be blamed for what happened to Barbara. I hope one day you can believe that." Marcia comforts me.

Comforts me, at her daughter's tomb. "She's always going to be with us." I swear. Marcia sniffs and hugs Nancy and I to her.

"Yes, she will."

"She was too stubborn not to be." Nancy comments, voice soft and cracking from disuse. Mr. Holland laughs wetly. "We'll let you... let you have your time with her, now."

I nod in agreement. "We can have dinner soon, if you'd like?"

"Yes, that would be wonderful. You haven't seen the new house, yet."

Compensation from the government, I'm sure. I got more, too, Hawkins Lab concerned I'd go more public.

All of it went in our college funds, split evenly. I wanted to use it to buy the Hollands their new home, but Marcia insisted the settlement they received was more than enough to help them afford their house and keep them from falling into debt.

With one last hug Nancy and I leave Barb's parents at their daughter's grave, wrapped around each other. We find the boys leaning against Steve's Beemer, and I let Nancy go to Jonathan while I'm pulled like a magnet to Steve. As soon as I'm near his grasp, he tugs me into his chest, my head tucking under his chin as he leans back against his car, legs spread. I stand between them, trying to avoid staining his white shirt with my tears. I forgo wearing makeup today, knowing I'd only end up looking like a raccoon.

"I've got you, Roni." He mumbles into my ear, hand brushing down the back of my head, fingers tangling in my straightened blonde hair. Noticing I'm still shaking, even in my black trench, his arms tighten around me even more. "I think the plans to go to Jonathan's. Are you up for that?" He asks me gently, and I turn my head to look over at the couple across from us. Nancy's nodding, her cheeks cupped by Jonathan's hands, a small smile on her face.

I turn my head and look up, Steve watching me. "Yeah. That sounds perfect." My smile is soft and sad, but I'm still happy. Well, as happy as I can be. "Thank you."

"For what?"

"Being you." I whisper, then kiss his jaw. He smiles and kisses my forehead and the tip of my nose, holding me for a little longer.

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**December 15, 1984**

I hum as I turn onto the beaten trail to Hopper's cabin, Christmas music filling my car until I cut the engine off, ready to make the trek in just my dad's bomber jacket and blue knit sweater dress. I'm not planning on being outside for long, or else I'd be bundled like Randy

from A Christmas Story.

There isn't much snow on the ground, so I left my snow boots at home in favor of my new thigh high boots. The leaves and sticks crunch under me as I walk through the woods, ducking under branches and hopping over patches of ice. The sun set an hour ago, but the Snow Ball won't start for another two hours. I can't imagine it'll take El more time than that, but on the other hand dramatic entrances are important. There's nothing wrong with being fashionably late.

*I want Mike to faint when he sees her.*

I readjust the strap on my backpack, letting it rest on one shoulder as I make the trek through the woods, flashlight in hand. Having memorized where every tripwire trap is, I still take my time finding them in case Hopper got even more paranoid.

When I reach the front door, I do my own special knock. Tap. Tap. Bam. Tap.

"El! Calm down!" I hear Hopper shout, and the door practically bursts open, revealing our favorite superpowered girl wiping the blood away from her nose.

"Hey, sweetheart. *Oof*." She slams into me, hugging me close. Ever since Dr. Owens told Jim that "Jane Hopper" was his legal, bonafide adopted daughter, the two of them have been happier than I've ever seen. Especially Hopper, who's beaming at the energetic girl.

I laugh and hold her close. "You have your dress? You take a shower?"

"Yes. And yes." She steps back and blinks at me. "What's in there?" She points to my bag.

"Oh. Makeup and some hair stuff."

"Like my sister's?"

Right. Kali, the lab-sister El found in Chicago during our first annual week of Hell. "Not as dark, but yes."

"Will I look bitchin'?" I snort as Hopper rolls his eyes, huffing over to the kitchen.

"Absolutely. Come on, let's get you ready."

"You girls going to need anything?" Hopper gruffs out.

I smile. "Music. But not your old man shit."

He swipes at me with a kitchen towel and I yelp, jumping out of the way. El tugs me into her room, getting us straight to business. "Is this pretty?" She asks, holding up a steel blue dress with burgundy polka dots and puffed sleeves.

I hum, taking it in my hands. The fabrics a little scratchy and faded, but it's still a nice dress. Simple, but it won't make her look plain. "I think you're going to look very pretty. And bitchin'." I amend. She smiles, big and happy. "Did you eat yet? Real food, not Eggos."

"No." She answers.

I snort and storm out of her room where Hopper is unhelpfully munching on popcorn, drinking a beer, and watching an episode of *E/R*. Without asking I pick up his second bowl and march into the kitchen to grab some soda for El and me. A quick check of the fridge tells me Hopper hasn't been the best at grocery shopping. "Whoa, where are you going with that? It's my popcorn!"

"You only need one bowl. Plus, it's not our fault you don't have food with some nutritious value!" I argue with him.

"Hey, watch it hooligan!"

I narrow my eyes. "I'm going to tell Joyce you've been slacking on healthy foods."

"Now, what a second - get back here, Robin Hood!" Hopper stammers after me. I cackle and practically skip back to El's room to find her already dressed in her outfit.

"It's too big." She mutters sadly, the dress bunching out around her like a little tent. It's so cute I want to laugh, but I hold it in because

her eyes have grown big with worry and fear.

"Oh, sweetheart, it's okay. We can fix it. You really think I was going to show up here without any accessories?"

She perks up a bit and jumps onto her bed, crossing her legs. I pick up a towel and wrap it around her, offering her the bowl of popcorn while I get the stuff for her hair ready. "What's that?" She points at my Aquanet.

"Hairspray, to make your hair stay in place. It's less heavy than that gel you used to slick your hair back, badass."

She smiles and nods, mouth bulging with popcorn as she chews before sipping from her can of coke. "Okay."

I smile and sit on the bed behind her, supplies laid out on the plaid comforter. "You may want to put your popcorn down. This stuff can get everywhere." She nods and sets the bowl down on her carpet, the coke going on her bedside table. When she straightens I run my fingers through her curls, detangling and stretching them a bit so her locks reach the nape of her neck. "You like the curls, right?"

"Right." She responds, voice sure and serious.

I grin, even though she can't see me, and give her hair a quick puff of Aquanet - light enough that it won't get crunchy - and twist the brown locks with my fingers, creating new curls. I do it a couple of times, until her curls are big and shiny despite how short her hair is. Noticing a few strands on the right side are being stubborn, I pin them back with a few bobby pins. Getting off the bed to walk around and face El, I sweep her bangs to the right, giving them some volume at the roots with a light teasing.

On the corner of her bedside table rests a blue bow pin. Taking a small section of hair at the top left side, I pin it back with the plastic clip. "There. Your hair is done. Have some more popcorn, then we'll brush your teeth and do your makeup, okay?"

"Okay." She smiles at me and stands, taking the mirror I'd placed on the bed and checking her reflection. She grins even wider and gives

me a quick hug before going back to her snack. To my complete horror, *You Don't Mess Around With Jim* starts playing in the living room.

Look, I got nothing against Jim Rone, but everytime Hopper drives me someplace, he plays this song at least once. And he does a weird dance, too, behind the wheel. Whenever I point out that someone can see him, he gestures to his gun and winks.

El starts laughing at my face and I roll my eyes, tapping her nose with my finger. She offers me the bowl and I take some popcorn while we sit in a comfortable silence. "I know you can't really... go out yet. Except for tonight. Do you want me to go shopping for you? Get more clothes and things for your room?" I ask, taking note of the limited items in her vicinity.

"Hop said he would do it."

"Do you want him to?"

"No."

I snort at her honesty. "Tell you what. I'll go with sit down with two of you, while you figure out exactly what you need and want. I'll be the shopper *and* the mediator."

"Mediator?"

"A person who helps resolve a conflict. An argument. They try to keep the peace between two fighting people."

"Keep the peace. *Mediator*." She tells herself out loud, memorizing the new word.

"I'm sure the kids will help you learn more. Hopper probably hasn't been teaching you math or science, right?"

"No math or science. Just words and spelling. And time."

I smile. "Dustin can help you with science. Mike and Lucas are better at math. Will's great at history and English, and so's Max."

"Okay." She mumbles.

"Nancy and I are going to have girls' nights, soon. With Max. I can talk to Hopper, see if you can join us. It'll probably be at my house, to keep you safe. Limit questions 'till everything with you and the Lab is settled. Would that be fun?"

"Yes."

I'd imagined it would be, considering she's only had Hopper to talk to this past year. "Okay." I perk up. "I'm really happy you're here, El. I don't know if I told you before. But thank you for coming home."

She nods and sets aside the empty bowl, the towel still covering her dress as she hugs me. "Didn't want to go. Had to save you, though."

"Next time, I'm saving you."

"No next time." She swears. "I closed the gate."

"Well, I can at least save you from looking like you're wearing a tent." I tease, a warm smile on my face. She flashes one back. "Go brush your teeth, sweetheart. Then I'll do your makeup and fix the dress, okay?"

"Okay." She flounces off to the bathroom with her towel wrapped around her protectively. At least Hopper taught her good hygiene, because when she comes back into the room her teeth are pearly white and the gums are gunk-free.

"Minty fresh. Nice, sweetheart." We high-five and she sits down. "Okay, let's do some dark pink eyeshadow. Eyes closed." She nods like she understands and moves her legs so I can comfortably stand in front of her. Dabbing my middle finger in the shimmery powder, I gently tap it onto her now closed lids, careful not to make it too heavy or uneven. With careful strokes of my index finger, I lighten and sweep it gently under her eyes, too, giving the look some dimension by tapping a little bit of the lighter pink on her inner lid, and some purple on the outer corners. "Okay, open. But look up and stay very still." She nods and does as I ask. I take out the mascara and lift it close to her face, stopping when she flinches. "Shh, it's okay. It's



mascara. I'm only going to do a little, but don't move, okay?" She breathes in and looks up, and I carefully swipe some product on her lashes. "There, done." She blinks a bit, bring moisture back to her eyes, and I pull out a small compact of blush as well as a little makeup brush. I gently pat the rouge on the apples of her cheeks, smiling so she copies me. A small tap of product goes on her nose, too. She doesn't look like Rudolph, but there's color on her pale face.

"All done. We'll do some pink gloss, okay?"

"Okay."

I have her purse her lips and paint some onto them, watching as she dramatically smacks her lips. "There, makeup is done, sweetheart!" She smiles and jumps up, dropping the towel to the ground.

"My dress." She reminds me, twirling with the skirt poofing out around her like a tiny parachute. I nod and go over to my bag, pulling out some belts and a few necklaces.

"Okay, I found some cute accessories from when I was younger. These should fit." I mention, laying out her options.

"Pretty." She points to Steve's necklace, her fingers barely touching the tiny gardenia. I smile at her distraction.

"Thank you. Steve gave it to me, for my birthday."

"He only got you cards. He laughed. Why did he do that?" She asks, eyes furrowed in anger.

Kind of wanting to see what she'd do to him for that stunt, but also not wanting the guy I love to end up attacked by Hawkin's resident superhero, I squeeze her hands in mine. "He was pranking me. It was only a joke. I'd been pranking him for a few weeks, now, so it was payback. Karma." She tilts her head like a confused puppy, and it's near-identical to Dustin's, almost making me crack up. "This was his real gift. He's a good man, El. I can bring him around sometime, let you get to know him."

"He's your Mike?" She asks, and I bite my lip.

"Kind of. It's a little different."

"Oh. But he's... a good man?"

"One of the best I know. Even when he was a dick, he was good to me."

"He makes you happy."

"He's always made me happy. Even when he pissed me off. I just never admitted it to myself."

"So, he's your boyfriend?" She tests out the word, like it's something foreign - which it is.

I shake my head. "No."

"Why not?" She asks, confused and frustrated. "He makes you *happy*."

"Guess we're both scared."

"Why?"

I pause. "Because we don't want to lose each other."

"Stupid." I blink at her, and she frowns. "That's stupid. He makes you happy. So be happy. *With him*. Don't be scared. Be brave." She pokes at my heart, and I smile, tearing up with pride as I cup her chin.

"How did you get so wise?"

"TV."

I snort, loudly, laughing even though she doesn't get why. She lets her confusion go, though, and joins me, soft bell-like giggles peeling out of her. "Okay. I have to talk to Hopper about his teaching methods. Let's finish getting you ready, sweetheart."

She nods and smiles, holding up different belts and waiting for my response. I frown and shake my head until she finds a dark pink one, the color almost matching the polkadots on her dress. "Alright, that should work! It's a little long, though." She pouts worriedly. "But we'll

figure it out." She nods and walks over to me, handing me the belt. I gently wrap the plastic-coated material around her waist, just tight enough to give her dress some shape. I have to wrap the belt twice, but it all works out and I'm left with a very smiley girl.

"Thank you!" She tells me, and I stop her from leaving the room.

"Wait! One last thing." El stops and looks at me, eyebrows furrowed. I find a tiny box buried under the other jewelry and open it, pulling out a necklace from my childhood, one I'd forgotten about until last night, when I was getting El's stuff together. "My dad gave me this, when I was younger. I took it off when he... when he left. I found it the other day, and I couldn't bring myself to wear it. But then I thought about you, and how much I missed you this past year. I want you to have it." I hold the silver necklace up, a chain attached to either side of the arrow so the pendant rests horizontally. She looks at it in wonder, and I smile. "So you know I'm always going to be with you."

"Thank you." She whispers in wonder, and I hold it open. She steps forward and I carefully clasp it together. "I'll keep it safe." She promises, and I don't know how to tell her that isn't necessary. This is for her, not for me.

"Everything I brought, you can keep." El stares at me in surprise. "I'm serious. It's yours. The accessories are old, but the makeup's new."

"Thank you."

"Welcome home, El." I pull her into a hug. "Do you have shoes?"

"Mhmm. Joyce got me a pair. Flats." She lets go to find them and carefully slips the dark blue shoes on, and like that she's ready to go. "Do I look pretty?"

"Pretty *bitchin'*." I promise, then grin. "Come on, let's go give your old man a heart attack."

"My old man? Heart attack."

"I'll explain it later." I promise, and lead her out of her bedroom, my bag clutched in my hand. "Hopper, she's ready!"

"Jesus, that took way too long... oh, wow." He comments, arms crossed in his police jacket as he stares at the girl. "You look great, kiddo. Thank you." Hopper tells me as she flounces off to the bathroom. "Seriously. I'd never be able to do that." I watch his eyes get teary, and realizing who he's thinking about, I give the large man a daughterly hug.

"You'll learn. You know, you're going to be a really good father to her."

"Yeah? How's that?" He questions, amusement leaking out of his voice, along with some self-deprecation.

"She's angry, and lost. I was too, for five whole years. You helped me, you did right by me. You'll do even better for her."

"Veronica -"

I step away from him and smile. "I know you'll be an amazing dad to El, because you're just as good for me. Thank you for sticking by me, even when I was at my worst. You're a good man, Jim Hopper."

He wipes away his tears and pulls me back into a hug. "God, Hooligan, I just wanted to take you home that night to avoid paperwork. If I knew you'd end up making me all mushy I would have just let you go." I snort, and we separate when footsteps approach us.

"Are you okay? Crying." El points up at Jim, who glares down at me. "Sad."

"No."

"Half-way happy?" She asks.

His lips twitch and he comes forward, hugging El to him. "*Happy*." He amends. "I have something for you. It belonged to Sara." I look down at his wrist as he slips off the thick blue hair tie that's been around it since I met him. "I think you should have it."

El takes it wordlessly, sliding her hand through it and letting the blue braided tie rest on her own wrist. Her fingers trace over it in awe,

and she smiles with big eyes at her adoptive father. "Thanks."

"Yeah kid." He turns to me. "You coming with us, or going home?"

"Home, probably."

"Your mom take Dustin to the dance?"

I shake my head. "No, Steve promised him he'd be the chauffeur or whatever. I think mom's picking him up, though. What's with the third degree?" I ask.

Hopper smirks and pats my shoulder. "Just curious, hooligan." I narrow my eyebrows but choose to focus on El.

"Before I go, I need a couple of pictures. Stand right there." I move her to stand in front of the door. "Smile, sweetheart." She does as I say, lips twitching shyly. I take two photos with my Polaroid before letting them develop in the front pocket of my backpack. "Alright, I'm off to go watch some reruns with my mom. You have fun." I hug El briefly, then Hopper. "And you, don't terrorize Mike. They're awkward enough at that age."

Hop snorts and packs my back. "Yeah, sure. Get home safe."

I walk to the front door, only to be briefly stopped by El. "You okay?"

"You're brave. Be brave." She tells me, a clear order. I blink at her, then nod.

"Okay, sweetheart. Okay. Goodnight, guys." I walk out the door in a bit of a daze, reminding myself to focus on the traps as I make my way to the *Millennium Falcon*.

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It takes me turning onto my road to realize exactly where I should be going, even if it still scares me to the core. With a sharp turn and an even sharper intake of breath, I'm heading to Loch Nora. I don't stop until I reach the house I've been dead-set on avoiding. The driveway is empty, save for the Beemer, and I pull up next to it, the driveway spacious enough to comfortably hold four cars.

I quietly turn off the engine and get out, my backpack on my back. *Be brave, be brave.* I murmur to myself, walking up to the front door.

"*What are you waiting for, Smarties?*" I swear I hear Barb say behind me, and I smile.

Absolutely nothing, Barb.

I press the doorbell and bounce on my heels, bare legs shaking in the breeze. "I'm coming, hang on!" Steve shouts on the other side. He opens the door, eyes focused on the cash in his hands. "It's \$25, yeah?"

"I'm that cheap?" I joke, and he jolts, eyes roving up from my shoes to my eyes. His own hazel orbs are wider than Bambi's.

"Roni? What are you doing here?"

"It's you or bad reruns with my mom, Steve." I make up. "You going to let me in, handsome?"

"Yeah, uh, yes." He steps out of the way and I walk in. "Here, I can take your coat. And your bag."

"Thank you." I smile and hand both over, watching as he delicately hangs everything up on the coat rack. When he's done, we stare at each other awkwardly.

"Um, I'm going to go get some snacks. I ordered pizza, it should be here -" the doorbell rings, "now. It's here now. Um, I'll meet you in the living room." The bell rings again, and he rolls his eyes. "I'm coming!" He shouts, turning towards the door to deal with the impatient delivery guy.

I walk down the hall and into the living room, bigger than any I've ever been in. The blinds have been pulled out of the way to reveal the pool, and while my stomach twists with telltale anxiety, I'm done being scared. I'm ready to be brave.

So with a small exhale I open the glass door and walk through, finding myself on the edge of the heated pool, staring out at the forest behind Steve's home. I look over to the diving board, and it's

like I'm back at that night, facing away from Barb as she checks her open wound. It hurts, but I don't feel wrong. Like I'm going to die... like my brain is telling me I'm going to die. What happened to me, I'm never going to "get over it". I'm probably never going to stop having bad dreams.

But I can choose to remember the good stuff when that happens. I can remember Barb's smile, her stubbornness. I can think about how smart Nancy is, how loyal she's been. How fiercely she fights. Or Jonathan's kindness, how much we love each other. Literally every moment we've ever spent together, good or bad, because he's my brother and we'll always have each other's back. My little brother's bite, my mom's hugs. Lucas and Mike's debates, Max's red hair and courage. El's strength, her big eyes, her innocence and her wisdom. I can think about Hopper looking out for me, and strawberry milkshakes. I can think about Will, how big his heart is even after everything he's gone through. I can choose to think about Joyce - how she manages to overcook and undertook her food, how she always seems to know how I'm feeling before I do. Or how I was at her house when I got my first period, and she was with me the whole time I cried or moaned in pain.

I'll even think about the good years I shared with my dad. The first time I held a bow, the first time I made a bullseye. How prepared he made me for what I'd go through without even knowing I'd go through it. Even though it ended the way it did, I'll think about Billy listening to me when he didn't have to.

I can think about Steve. How he's always been there, whether it was to argue with me or now comfort. I can remember his hazel eyes, how they always remind me of home. I'll focus on how everytime he looks at me, I feel my heart practically bursting with love because he has no reason to know better than I know myself. I'll think about his hands cupping my face when I'm having a panic attack, how protective he is of Dustin.

So I take off my thigh high boots and my fluffy socks and sit down by the pool, the skirt of my dress pulled up a bit as I gently lower my feet into the heated water. There's that initial fear of a clawed hand reaching up to grab me, of vines crawling around the sides. The Harrington's have lights in their pool, though, and they're bright

enough to show me I'm going to be okay. I don't want to get all the way in - not even if I was wearing a bathing suit - but this feels like a good start.

"*Roni!* Veronica, where'd you go?" Steve shouts from inside the house. I turn a bit, looking through the open glass door, his back to it.

"Outside!" I call back. He jumps and turns, nearly dropping the two beers and box of pizza.

"Jesus *Christ*, you trying to give me a heart attack?" He asks, cheeks flushed with anger. I smile a little and shake my head, patting the concrete next to me.

"Sorry, baby." I apologize. He sighs and walks over, setting the pizza and two cans behind me before slipping off his socks and rolling up his jeans. They can't go very high up, so the bunched hemming under his knees still gets wet.

"I didn't think you'd come out here." He murmurs, looking at me warily.

I shrug. "Me neither. But... I'm tired of being scared. Of letting my fears rule my life, you know? Besides, I never even got to check out your heated pool last year."

He nods and looks down at his knees, picking at the denim fabric. "No. You didn't."

"Steve, don't do that. It wasn't your fault. None of it was your fault."

"I was being a stupid teenager, and two people paid the price - one with their life. So yes, it was." He opens his can and takes a swig of beer, Adam's Apple bobbing as it goes down.

With a soft sigh I lift my hand, placing it on the back of his head and stroking the surprisingly soft locks. "I never blamed you. Not once." He sets the beer down between us but doesn't look at me. Instead his head lifts so he can gaze out at the trees. "I could never, ever blame you."

"You should." He whispers. I sigh sadly and move his beer towards



the pizza so I can press our sides together. I lean up and kiss his cheek, twice. He shudders a bit.

"Don't tell me what to do." I warn him, words harsh but tone light and amused. He grins, staring down at me a bit.

"Pretty sure no one can do that."

"Damn straight." I reach back to open my own can of beer and hand Steve his, my head leaning against his bicep as we look out at the forest. "Thank you for dropping off D, by the way."

"Hey, the little shit's grown on me."

"How'd the Farrah Fawcett spray work? He manage to capture your signature style?" Steve jumps away in shock and I laugh at his betrayed expression.

"He told you? Sorry princess, I'm going to have to kill him."

I snort and giggle, shaking my head. "No. He didn't tell me anything. He did make me drive him out of town to pick up a can. I pieced it all together from there. You just confirmed it, though, so thank you for that baby."

Steve pouts. "You suck." Then he holds up a finger. "Nope. Don't say it." I grin and wiggle my eyebrows, drinking some more beer. "How much are you judging me?"

"I'm not." He raises an eyebrow. "No, seriously. I'll probably tease you endlessly about it, but I don't care. Farrah Fawcett's awesome. Though it does explain your hair." I run a hand through his locks and he smiles at me warmly. "I am mad that Nance never told me. It would've made shopping for your birthday even easier."

"Nancy doesn't know." I blink in surprise.

"Oh. Huh."

"Yeah." There's an awkwardness rolling in, surrounding us in a thick fog.

"Hey, you okay?"

"Yeah. Just... thinking. I saw Nancy when I was dropping Dustin off. She just looked so happy. Happier than she's ever really looked around me. And it's all thanks to Jonathan." I can feel my heart cracking a little, but I pretend that everything's alright inside while I nod for Steve to continue, even though he isn't looking at me. "It got me thinking, that's all. About being happy, with the right person. The person you should be with, because they make the most sense. And then I thought about you, and Hargrove. How even if it was only for a few weeks, you laughed louder and you smiled bigger, and even though you're ice, you were also running hot. But it was *scary*, Roni." Then he looks at me, really looks at me. "Looking at you now, though... you're different. Almost like how you were *before*. A good different, but..."

"Different." I look down at my feet as they kick underwater. "I don't know who I am anymore. I'm not sure I ever did. And I get that kids shouldn't have themselves figured out, but who I became was all I knew. It was so easy after my dad left to just close myself off. To be the Ice Queen, or whatever. It was even easier to act like that's who I am. Letting myself get angry and explosive was fun. But I don't want to be like that anymore. I don't want to be the Ice Queen, I don't want to yell and fight more than I've already had to. *I'm tired of it.*" I admit, and a large hand covers my smaller limb. "I feel different, too. Like the old me."

"You *are* her. You never really stopped being her, not with the people you care about." Steve tells me, his voice soft.

"I just don't know who I'm supposed to be." I whisper back, still not looking at him.

"Hey, you'll figure it out. It's like, I don't know, damn, what's the friggin' word? Oh yeah, a scale. Maybe you can be both. Find the balance and shit. It's okay to be all three people, you know. You don't ever have to be just one thing."

Finally I look away from the water and up into hazel eyes. "Has anyone ever told you how incredibly smart you are?" I ask, a little breathless. Steve only rolls his eyes and blushes, like I'm teasing him

or something. Oh. "You're so *incredibly* smart."

He blinks and snorts. "I thought I was a dumbass?"

Remembering one of my favorite nicknames for him, I shake my head. "I mean, you are one sometimes, but that doesn't mean you're an idiot. Or stupid. I'm a dumbass, too. Jonathan and Nancy can be dumbasses, especially Johnny. Dustin's the *biggest* dumbass I know." I smile warmly at Steve. "You're my smart dumbass, Steven."

He nods, then smiles with me. "I can work with that. As long as I'm yours."

"And are you?" I ask, voice barely loud enough to be considered a whisper. Before I can stop him he stands up, shaking the water off his legs.

"Stay here! I'll be right back!" I blink in confusion as he rushes to the house. He stops briefly to turn around, like he thought I'd moved from my frozen state. "Stay! Okay." He runs inside and my eyebrows furrow.

He's gone a few minutes. In that time I've tried to at least reach over and eat a slice of the rapidly cooling pizza, but I can't find it in myself to move. Finally, he returns with his boombox in hand. He sets it down by one of the pool chairs and pops in a cassette. His back is to me as he messes with it, but he still talks. "We should have our own Snow Ball. I know I don't have any lights up or decorations, but this can work, right? Yeah, it'll work." It's almost like he's talking out loud, and he probably is, but I'm watching him too fondly to ask.

When the intro to *You And I* by Eddie Rabbitt and Crystal Gayle begins, he stands and turns, hair a little wild, the curl in the front flopping everywhere. He brushes a hand through his locks to fix it, then holds out his hand. "Dance with me, Roni?"

I smile, cheeks practically burning, and take my feet out of the water. They're instantly cold, but I don't care, because soon Steve's left hand is gently holding my right, and his right arm is around my lower back, and my left arm is around his neck. I'm standing on the balls of my feet so I can look at him, and he smiles that amazing smile of his,

hazel eyes shining as we begin to sway.

Eddie Rabbit and Crystal Gayle sing about building dreams together, about being alright. The whole of the first verse and chorus, Steve and I just sway to the soft crooning. *"And I remember our first embrace, that smile that was on your face"* Rabbitt and Gayle sing, and Steve pulls me in even closer.

"I want to, I mean I need to tell you something. It's, uh, important, alright?" I nod, and he sucks in a deep breath. "And I'm not sure how you'll respond, but I'm hoping I don't ruin shit by saying it."

"Steve, it's okay." I promise.

He nods. "Right. So... I know I made it seem like I was moping about Nancy and Jonathan, but... I was really just being a coward. Again. I'm tired of being one."

"Steve, c'mon, you're one of the bravest people I know."

He only laughs sardonically. "You'd be surprised."

"Hey, you know I hate it when you get down about yourself." I gently remind him.

"I know, I know. But this time I have to be. God, I screwed up so bad these past five years. I should've just been honest from the start, but shit was I scared."

"Scared of what?"

He breathes in then carefully exhales, pressing his forehead to mine and closing his eyes. The action has my heels lowering to the ground. "I was scared I wasn't good enough for you." He opens his eyes and looks into mine, unblinking. "So I acted like a dick to you instead, because I thought if I acted like I didn't care things would be easier. I was so, so wrong. By the time I got it through my thick head that I messed up and should've just been honest it was too late. I was just happy you'd given into bantering with me. There's a reason I would always seek you out, and it wasn't because I hated your or wanted to knock you down a peg or any of the other shit I said. *Jesus Christ* this is hard. What I'm trying to say is -"

"*I love you.*" I breathe out, interrupting him, *being brave* like El and Nance said to be. His forehead moves off of mine, our faces no longer close.

Steve blinks and sputters, speechless. "I... you... *what?*"

"I love you, Steven Theodore Harrington. So much." I vow, voice unwavering. "I've loved you for almost four years. *I love you.*"

"Oh. Oh. Tha-that's good. That's great. Wow."

I blink up at him as we stop swaying, biting my lip as I anxiously wait for him to finally say it, because I'm sure I know how he feels but damn it I *need* to be right. "Steve?"

"Yeah?" His eyes focus back on mine.

I swallow and release my lip from my teeth. "I need you to tell me."

"Tell you what?" Steve's all confused and out of breath, like he doesn't know exactly where he is.

My eyes get misty. "That you love me."

He nods and starts to lean down, dropping my right hand in favor of cupping the back of my neck. My left hand slides down to grab onto his maroon sweater, the right one raising to rest next to the left. "I love you, Veronica Leigh Henderson. I've loved you since middle school. And I never stopped loving you. I love you so much that sometimes it *hurts* to look at you because my heart's pumping fast enough to explode."

"You've loved me that long?"

"Yes."

"Right." I nod, then glare. "If you don't kiss me right now I swear -" Quicker than a bolt of lightning, his lips are pressed against mine.

It feels like every cliché I can think of; fireworks, a rollercoaster, going into a freefall. My whole body feels like it's glowing, every nerve's awake and lit up brighter than the sky on the Fourth of July.

Our lips move like that's what they were made to do, like they've known each other their whole lives. My fingers clutch the soft fabric of his sweater even more, and Steve's practically lifting me off my feet, only my toes touching the ground.

We break apart for air, Steve not letting go of me. His left hand comes up to curve around my cheek, thumb stroking my skin like I'm something precious. Before I can stop myself, the words I'd been cut off from come rolling out. *"I'll have to kill you."* I feel myself burning up with embarrassment but Steve only laughs, smiling and closing his eyes as our foreheads are pressed together. It takes my breath away even more than the kiss did.

"Please don't."

"I won't. I'd rather kiss you, anyway." He nods and grins, eyes still closed when he presses our lips together. Mine shut, too, and Steve laughs into the kiss, this time lifting me completely off the ground, just like he did when we hugged outside of the tunnels. When I hear what song is playing, I laugh. *"You Can't Run From Love?"* I can't believe you *Radio Romanced* me."

He smirks as he lowers me back down, left hand now tugging the ends of my hair. "Eddie Rabbitt's great, Roni."

I roll my eyes and shove his chest lightly, frowning playfully. "God, we're such *dumbasses*. We could've been doing that for years."

Steve laughs even louder, nodding in agreement. "Well, we got our shit together now. *You can't run from love.*" He teasingly sings along with Eddie Rabbit and I smile.

"No more running." I promise.

He licks his lips and leans down. "Only together."

"Together. Together's good."

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*3rd Person POV (Steve's)...*

Steve's eyes blink open, and he groans a bit at the light pouring in

from the blinds he didn't close. He feels warm and grounded, like something's keeping him down in the best way. A soft murmur has his head lifting a bit from its uncomfortable position on the couch pillow, and an explosion of blonde princess curls are splayed all over his chest.

Everything that happened last night comes rushing back to him, and Steve's almost overwhelmed by it all. Roni's here, with him. Finally. Of course, there's a more *physical* proof that he's happy, and it takes a few moments for Steve to think very unhappy thoughts instead. The demodogs work like a charm, *which is good to know*.

He wiggles down a little more on the couch, careful not to wake his sleeping Roni. When her face is pressed into his neck he smiles, rubbing his jaw against her forehead in a way he'll totally deny later on. Probably.

No, he won't.

Steve closes his eyes, happy to just lay there even though he knows he needs to brush his teeth, and she's sort of crushing his ribs with her elbow, and her breath's a little warm against his neck. He doesn't even know how late he woke up, only that it's Sunday and he's happy to just spend it right here.

With both arms around this girl, this amazingly complex and wonderful girl, Steve's empty house feels like a home. He strokes his hands along her back, over the shirt he leant her. Their sweatpant-clad legs are wrapped together and he bends his right knee up to keep her even closer.

Roni murmurs into his neck, smacking her lips cutely and letting out a tiny snore. He grins and opens his eyes, her sun kissed skin glowing in the morning light.

"Goddamn, you're so gorgeous." He whispers, and she nuzzles into him.

It could be minutes, it could be hours, but her eyes flutter and she tilts her head back, brilliant green orbs a little glazed. "Hi baby." Her voice comes out husky and light, breaking the silent spell.

"Mornin' princess."

She smiles and hums, and there's nothing to keep him from pressing their lips together sweetly, sleepy pecks turning into lips moving in perfect harmony. "Mmm. Steve. Steve. Steven. We need to brush our teeth -"

Steve just kisses her deeper, cutting her off. She's already half on top of him, but it's not enough. He shifts her body, laughing when she yelps and lands completely on her front. He scoots back, propping himself up on the forgotten pillow with his head resting on his left hand. The fingers on his right hand lift up to trace over the scar on her temple, down her cheek, all the way down to where her necklace rests, having been pulled out from under her shirt when he'd moved her. As he traces over the tiny flower and the pearls, Roni's fingers trace over him, the digits on her left hand tracing along his square jaw, his nose, across his lips. He smiles and kisses them, completely at peace. "I did good with your present, huh?" Steve asks rhetorically.

"Luckily for you. That card trick was just *mean*." She complains, but he knows she's messing with him. Steve grins, trying not to lose himself in those bright green eyes, at the little spark of mischief she's only recently gotten back. There's also no way of mistaking the love in her eyes for anything else, and *fuck* it's all for him.

"Sorry, gorgeous." It's smooth and totally a lie. A lie that gets him a grin and a little chuckle.

"You suck."

"That's my line."

She *snorts*, and the fact she doesn't blush about it or apologize like any other teenage girl around a guy would makes him fall even more in love with her. This is real, everything about her is real. He's spent five years cataloging all her imperfections like a damn jerk because he thought pointing them out to himself would make the feelings go away. Not that it worked or anything. He's watched her grow so much since he met her - not in height, because damn she's shorter than the kids they watch, but as a person and shit. He loves everything about her.



"What's going on in that big head of yours?" Steve blinks out of his thoughts as Roni taps at his forehead, next to the scarred-up cut.

"You're amazing."

She rolls her eyes and blushes. "Yeah, well, so are you."

Steve finds himself making a small noise of doubt, wanting to believe her even though his dad's voice is screaming in his mind, calling him a *brainless moron who'll never amount to anything*. "You're only saying that because I said it."

Her right eyebrow starts to quiver, a warning that she's getting pissed. It's adorable and scary. It isn't until she clenches her fists that he knows she's upset, too. Before he can say anything she slides up, her legs bracketing his waist in a way that's both sexy and calming. Steve sits up more, bringing his legs closer together while keeping them bent to support his girl. He softly unfurls her fists, inspecting them for moon-shaped bloody marks. No skin was broken though, and he kisses her palms gently.

"Steven." He looks up at Roni, unable to keep looking away as her right eyebrow twitches more and her eyes get a little darker. "You're amazing. *Everything* about you is amazing. How well you know me is amazing. How well you know me is amazing. How much you care about my brother is amazing. How protective you are of everyone you care about - even if they've hurt you - is amazing. Your heart is amazing, how brave you are is amazing, your mind is amazing." She leans forward and kisses between his brows, then moves back a bit. "Do you remember what you said to me, at Tina's party?"

"The fight?"

"All of it." Steve makes a sad noise, heart breaking a little at the memory because he made his girl cry, and he didn't even stop to ask if she was alright before he laid into her. Especially because she was having not-hallucinations and had convinced herself she'd lost her mind. "Hey, no, look at me." His eyes reopen, and she gives him a soft smile. "I know you, too. You can't stand still when you sense danger. You always have to be moving, and you shift your weight when you can't hide how nervous you are. When you're concentrating, your

tongue pokes out like a little dog's, and it shouldn't be attractive but it totally is. Your eyes are more brown when you're sad. They get greener if you're happy or about to do something reckless." She smiles at him and it's like looking at the stars on a clear night. "You love Wham! and Duran Duran, but you lose your shit over REO Speedwagon. It's gross and I totally don't like your taste in music, but I love the way you bop around like the kids on sugar. You've got a great voice, too, when you're not messing around. Two weeks ago I almost went to heaven because you were singing along to *Girls On Film*, and I wanted to shut off the actual song and just hear you because you make Duran Duran good."

"What's with all the Duran Duran hate?" Steve jokes, trying to distract himself from the butterflies in his stomach.

Her lips twitch into an amused grin. "They're awful, Steve."

"Please, you know every word of *Hungry Like The Wolf*. Admit it, you like them."

"Never. Now stop interrupting me, I'm trying to be romantic!" She admonishes him, and he feels himself starting to smile like a crazy person. "Thank you. Things I know about you... Oh, right. When I'm about to do something stupid you let out this special huff just for me and bite your lip like you're trying to stop me, even though *you know* that probably won't happen. You like cats and dogs, and you're scared of birds. I've seen you walk away from them way too often for you to deny it."

"They're creepy." He defends himself, but it goes ignored.

"You like chocolate milkshakes, but that's obvious. You don't like onion rings because you think they're slimy on the inside, and you're right but they're still yummy, Steve. You only wear Nike shoes unless you've gotta dress up for something, and you hate basketball but you do it because you're good at it and it keeps you in shape." She peers down at him with a happy smile. "You love baseball, but actually preferred pitching to batting. That's also a little obvious - I used to go to your little league games because my dad was friends with the coach. You're good. You're really good." Then she frowns, but still keeps her eyes on him. "I know why else you play basketball. Well,

why you even decided to try out for the team. You were hoping your dad would show up for the games, because he's the former captain. I went to every single one of your games when I got to high school, even before we became friends. Jonathan wanted company while he took pictures for the school paper and yearbook. I'd lie to myself and say I was only going to keep Jonathan from getting bullied. But I also went for you. Because that first time Johnny took me was your first game as captain, and my heart *broke* when you looked over at the bleachers and I saw your parents weren't there." Her eyes well with tears, just like his. "I didn't want you to think you were alone, so even though you never noticed me at the games, I still kept going."

"I noticed you." Steve breathes out, his voice working again. He nods shakily. "I mean, I didn't know that's why you were there, but I saw you." He feels himself get a little wistful, mind back on those darker, lonelier days. "Sometimes - a lot of the times - I'd pretend you were there for me."

"I was." She promises to him, all open and honest. He watches her collect herself a little trying to do the same. "I... your favorite color is blue. Like, dark blue. Or royal blue, I guess. You like green a lot, too \_."

"Especially when you're wearing it." Steve interrupts her, thinking about her green dress. "I love you in green, and lace, and my ratty clothes."

"Stop it, this is supposed to be about you." She complains, and he jostles her as he sits up all the way.

"You've already proved you know me. It's kind of creepy."

"Yeah, well, you're the same when it comes to me, you hypocrite." She pouts, and he grabs her into a quick kiss.

"Mhmm. And I wouldn't change it for the world." Steve murmurs against her lips, smiling as she shudders a bit before pressing their lips together harder, for much longer.

She's the first to pull away, catching her breath. A second later both of their stomachs growl, and Steve grins as she laughs, clutching her

belly as it rumbles in hunger. His does the same, *again*, and he takes their bodies' hint. "Does my *girlfriend* want some breakfast?" He asks, feeling a little timid. They hadn't exactly verbally labeled what they are, but he knows it isn't messing around or anything casual.

His smoothness is rewarded with a somehow shy-and-confident smile as Roni regrettably stands up, her hand outstretched for him to take. "Only if my *boyfriend* makes it."

If Steve wasn't so excited about this finally happening, he'd be a little embarrassed about the tiny bop he does as he takes her hand and gets off the couch. "Two orders of chocolate chip pancakes and bacon coming up. And because I'm feeling nice today, a coffee with milk and three sugars." Steve taps her nose with his free fingers and smiles before tugging her through the empty house to the kitchen.

"I love you." She swears, and he stops walking for a moment to turn and look down at her.

"I love you too, *Ronniekins*."

She immediately huffs, and he grins as he whisks her away once more. "I take back everything I said."

"No, you don't."

"Don't tell me how I feel." He grins, waiting for it. "*Fuck*, I don't. I *hate* you."

"You love me." He sings, and Steve doesn't need to turn around to know she's smiling as big as he is.

"So much."

They sit in a comfortable silence as he gets to work, and he finds himself kissing the top of her head every time he walks past. When he sets the hot coffee down in front of his still-sleepy girlfriend, he's rewarded with a kiss that almost makes him forget about the bacon.

"Saved it!" He calls over from the stove, smiling as Roni laughs. She laughs even harder when she catches him stacking the pancakes high up on a plate, arguing that the only one capable of eating all that is

Dustin.

"Baby, seriously, that's way too many pancakes."

Steve can't help but smile like a dork, setting the pile down in front of her. "I love it when you call me that."

"What, 'baby'?" He gulps as she smirks. "Baby, baby, baby, *baby*." She purrs, and he knows he's flushing so Steve rolls his eyes and walks away, trying to tell his *buddy* to calm down a bit because damn, she's too much. "*So won't you, please, be my, be my baby.*" Roni sings teasingly, a little off-key but smiling and humming the rest of The Ronettes' classic, grabbing three pancakes when Steve sets a plate down in front of her. He snorts when she takes nearly half the bacon, munching down on it.

"You're such a beautiful eater." She looks at him with deer-caught-in-headlights eyes and cheeks puffed out like a squirrel's, carefully chewing the syrupy pancakes and salty bacon. "Really. I should've borrowed Jonathan's camera and documented it."

She glares, but it's way less intimidating thanks to her puffy cheeks. It takes a few minutes for her to swallow. "Bite me."

"Okay." Steve shrugs and leans towards where she's sitting. His girlfriend jolts and tries to run out of the kitchen, but he's got longer legs so he twirls her into him and bends her back in a half-dip, looming over her.

"St-Steven! Stop!" She laughs as he pokes at her sides. Then she gulps, holding her stomach, and he stops.

"Shit, Roni, are you okay?"

Without missing a beat, she jumps on top of him and begins stabbing at his ribs with her thin fingers, laughing as he screams and tries to wiggle away. "Fooled ya!"

"Sc-screw y-you... *AH!*... scre-screw y-you, R-Ro-*RONI!*" She lets him go and Steve tries to swallow as much air as physically possible, glaring at her. "That was mean."

"You knew what you were getting into, Steven." She pats his shoulder and returns to the table, standing as she finishes her coffee. "I'm going to go brush my teeth."

"Yeah, yeah." He waves her off as she walks away, pointedly walking in the direction of the stairs and not the bathroom down the hall. Not that he blames her, or has said anything about it. He's just happy she was able to be by the pool, but that bathroom... he can't imagine what it's like for her, being back in his house after a year of avoiding it. All the ghosts that are there that he can't even see.

Steve sighs and stands up, stretching as he puts the leftover pancakes away and puts the dirty dishes, cups, and forks in the dishwasher, resolving to do it tonight.

He looks around his house, the one place in the neighborhood not decorated for Christmas. It's not that he hates the holiday - it's his favorite, actually - but he's spent four years without his parents there. Last Christmas Eve he spent at the Wheeler house with Nancy, and it was pretty fun if not a little stressful and awkward thanks to Mrs. Wheeler's questions and protective hovering. But that was just for dinner. He didn't open presents with them, he didn't relax in front of an open fire and drink hot chocolate and watch stupid Christmas movies.

No, he was at home with unwrapped presents his parents kept for him by the TV a week before, when they left town. He had a couple of beers, heated up a frozen dinner because he was too lazy to cook, and watched random adventure movies he'd picked up from Family Video, including Raiders of the Lost Ark and Jaws. He did sit in front of the open fire, but that was more so because he knew fire kills monsters, and for weeks he'd been scared it came back.

The nail bat had been by his side the whole time, ready to use.

But this year, the gate was closed. The Lab was shut down. He's got better friends than he ever did, people who made him good. And he has Roni, hopefully for a long time. Look, he knows their young, but something about them just feels right.

"What's the plan for today, baby? Baby?" He turns to look at his

girlfriend, Roni worriedly playing with her fingers when they make eye contact. "You okay?"

"I wasn't planning on doing anything."

She just nods and walks closer to him, arms wrapped around the back of his neck. "What's wrong, handsome?"

"Just thinking. That's all. Hey, why don't we go to yours for a bit. We can go out to the forest if you want, walk around. We don't have to stay inside all day."

She starts to smile, pearly white teeth flashing up at him. "Okay. I'm wearing this to mine, though. You're never getting any of this back." She gestures to his shirt and sweatpants, and Steve laughs before kissing the tip of her nose.

"That's fine. I'll be down soon." She lets him go and he walks away, not even bothering to hide the skip in his steps.

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*3rd Person POV (Steve's)...*

Steve let's go of Roni's hand when she stops her car, her front yard even more festive than last year. She gets out and he follows her, the dress from last night flipped over his shoulder while his hand finds her again. The watch on her left wrist glints under the porch lights as she opens the front door. "Mom, D, I'm home!" She calls, and his eyes focus on the giant Christmas tree in the corner of the room, covered in tinsel and ornaments with presents shoved underneath.

Steve feels eyes on him and turns to look at Roni. "What's up?"

Before she can answer, a door down the hall opens. "Leia! Dude, I've got so much to tell you. So those girls last night were freaking awful, and I was all sad, but then Nance asked me to dance. Stacy was so totally - Steve, hi. I mean it went great. I got so many numbers. I was the belle of the ball."

Steve tries to hide his laugh, but it's a little difficult considering Dustin clearly made the mistake of brushing out his hair after the dance instead of washing it, because it's sticking all over the place

like the Bride of Frankenstein's monster. "Hey buddy. So the look worked?" He pretends like he didn't hear the girls rejected him, because if Steve focuses on that he knows he'll be giving those stupid middle schoolers a piece of his mind.

Roni however looks pissed. "Give me names. I want their names. And I'll get Nancy some flowers. Those goddamn bitches."

"Hey, I'm all good. I mean, Will and I are the only two who didn't get kissed, but -"

"You're too young to be kissing anyone, D!"

Steve blinks down at his girlfriend. "You just threatened to off the girls who were to him."

He jumps when she turns on him and pokes his chest. "I can feel both ways, Steven."

"I'm sorry gorgeous, you're totally right." Steve just goes ahead and agrees, knowing first hand there's nothing more dangerous than Roni when she gets protective of her little brother.

"Thank you baby." She leans up and kisses him quickly, before she jolts back and blinks. "I, uh..."

"No *fucking* way! Holy shit!" Dustin shouts, and both of the older teens jump at the volume. Any fears Steve had are wiped away when he sees the youngest Henderson grinning wide, blue eyes sparkling. "Dude, you told her! Good for you, buddy! And you," he turns to Roni and the next thing Steve knows his girlfriend and her brother are slamming into the front door, "I'm so happy for you!"

Roni blinks over at Steve before smiling and wrapping herself around her little brother. "Thanks, D. I'm sorry those girls were -"

"Oh, who cares, my sister got the guy!" Then Dustin's releasing her and running towards his room. "I'm calling the Party! Holy shit this is awesome." He disappears for only a second before coming out of his room, pointing at Steve. "Hurt her, and I kill you."

"That's fair." Steve responds, but it goes unheard by Dustin as the kid



slams his bedroom door shut.

"So, he took that well." Roni comments, her jacket off as she rubs her bare arms. Steve smiles and pulls her into him, planting one on her.

"Mhmm." He releases his girlfriend and - feeling a little frisky - slaps her butt. "Go, get dressed. And tell your brother to get ready, too!"

She yelps and bats at her hand, but she's still smiling. "Why? Where are you taking us?"

"Where something warm! And better boots, too. Your hiking ones." Steve ignores her question and Roni grumbles, stalking off. In the distance Steve can hear her and Dustin yelling at each other. He smiles and sits down on the couch, Tews - Claudia's new cat, who apparently loves Roni the most - rubbing against his leg and purring.

He sits there for awhile, completely at peace as Tews jumps onto his lap and he scratches her back. Dustin's the first one to come out of his room, signature trucker cap covering the mess that is his hair. "Please tell me you're not making me a third wheel." The kid gripes, but he's still smiling at the idea of being included so Steve doesn't take him seriously.

"Whatever, kid. Roni, princess, how much longer!"

"As long as I want, Steven!" She shouts back. "Screw you!" He rolls his eyes at Dustin, amused when the kid does the same. Roni's door opens and she pokes her head out. "I love you, baby."

It warms Steve inside-out. "I love you too."

"Aw, *gross*. No, you two together's *definitely* going to be worse." Dustin complains, but he still pats Steve's back. "I am happy for you. Glad our talk helped."

"Hey, you remember how I said to act like you don't care?" Dustin nods up at him, and Steve's once again blown away by the fact someone finds him worthy of being looked up to. "I was wrong. You care about a girl, I mean really care, you tell her. Even if she doesn't feel the same, it's better to know. It means you don't have to make up for lost time."

Dustin nods, smiling softly. "Okay. I will, Steve."

"You're a good kid, Dustin." Steve swears, and footsteps click towards them.

"This okay, baby?" Roni asks, violet winter jacket zipped up over what's probably a sweater and her thickest pair of jeans are tucked into her hunting boots.

"How are you so gorgeous?" Steve responds, smirking at her when she blushes.

"Genetics. Let's go." She answers shortly, stomping past the two guys who exchange happy grins. "Now!"

"God, you're bossy."

"Coming Roni." Dustin and Steve follow after her, the kid ducking when Steve tries to smack at him. It'd totally be an earned hit, he made a cracking noise and mouthed "whipped" to Steve.

"So, where am I driving to?" Roni asks when everyone's inside and the car's warming up.

"The Christmas tree farm, just outside Hawkins. My house is missing one. Then we'll go back to mine. I have some decorations to put up." He watches her smile grow, green eyes sparkling, because of course she knows exactly why his house is bare of all acknowledgment of Christmas. "I'll need some help, though." He turns to Dustin, watching the kid as he reads him like his older sister can. "Mind calling the dipshits? I'll order us all pizza."

"Yeah, buddy, I'll call them. Now, milady, I believe King Steve requires our assistant. Tally forth, good woman."

Steve laughs, that stupid nickname sounding much better coming out of Dustin's mouth. "Yeah, yeah. Buckle up."

"Don't tell me what to - ow, son of a bitch!" Steve hears the seatbelt click in place, and smiles warmly as his girlfriend smirks at her kid brother's loud complaints. The lyrics from that Rabbitt and Gayle song ring in his head, distracting him from whatever song is actually

playing on the radio.

*Just you and I  
Sharing our love together  
And I know in time  
We'll build the dreams we treasure  
And we'll be alright  
Just you and I*

You and I, and *all our friends*. Steve amends, taking his girlfriend's hand. *And we'll be alright.*